



マグダラで眠れⅡ

支倉凍砂

電撃文庫
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マグダラで眠れⅡ

異教徒最大の鉱山の町カザンに、近々入植があると気づいた錬金術師のコースラとウェランド。それは、工房のある町グルベッティが戦争の最前線ではなくなることの意味していた。二人はなんとかカザン入植の波に乗るべく、手柄を立てようと画策する。

そんな時、二人のもとに“伝説の金属ダマスカス鋼”の噂が舞い込んでくる。どうやら鍛冶屋組合の若き長である少女イリーネが、その金属の秘密を知っているというのだが――。

眠らない錬金術師コースラと白い修道女フェネシスが紡ぐ、その「先」の世界を目指すファンタジー。シリーズ第2弾！



II

支倉凍砂

イラスト ◆ 鍋島テツヒロ
ILLUSTRATION: TETSUHIRO NABESHIMA
ISUNA HASEKURA

マグダラで眠れ

MAGDALA
MAY YOUR SOUL REST IN

電撃
DENGKI

BUNKO
文庫

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香辛料」の

支倉凍砂

が贈る

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1982年12月27日生まれ。猫が大好きなのに猫アレルギー。仕事が好きなのに仕事アレルギー。本当です。本当なんです。

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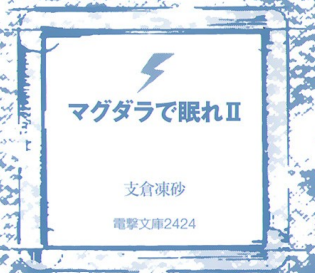
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「耳はともかく、髪の毛が白すぎるんだねえ」

ウエランド

クースラの昔馴染みの
錬金術師。同じ工房で研
究をしている。

ウル・ フェネシス

クースラの手で騎士団
の聖歌隊から連れ出さ
れた獣耳の修道女。



MAY YOUR SOUL REST IN MAGDALA. II

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Prologue

The ball shaped glass was filled with water, and floating gently on the water was a little boat made from a thin bronze plate. There was a candle in place of a sail upon it, lit by the fire left over from dinner. The little flame lit the entire room in a bizarre manner, through the spherical glass and the refraction of the water.

Once the flame flickered, the light in the room would sway along with the ripples imprinted upon the walls.

No matter which city guild it was, it was forbidden to work with candlelight during the night. On one hand, such a measure was for the practical purpose of preventing a fire; on the other, they felt it was a mystical power or something to create a lamp using water.

It would have been great if those who deemed this to be a superstition would imagine, how it would be like for a craftsman to focus on making a leather shoe as the flame flickered silently. The scene devoid of anyone, shadow of the tools placed on the workdesk, the corner where the wooden boxes were stashed aside, the equipment piled upon. There could be unimaginable things like spirits and fairies, beings that would befuddle the human heart, hiding in such darkness.

In this world, anything would change.

It was easy for humans to become inhumane.

“...”

The alchemist Kusla was reading an ancient technical book under such a light.

The binding was old, and there was a foul stench. The handwriting was extremely illegible; it seemed the scribe was treated no better than a slave, and wrote this with the will of wanting to pass on such ancient knowledge to the descendants.

The end of the book was stained in blood-like blackness, and the words written on it were “Let our souls be liberated from this suffering, and our souls to find rest.”

He could imagine the arduous conditions the scribe had to go through, the summer heat, the winter cold, his pen tied to his trembling fingers as he engraved each word one by one. This kind of writing was such that a mistake was irreparable, and was a form of ascetic. Many fanatical believers took up the pen, wanting to punish themselves to approach the feet of God, even if it was a little. The anguish from such a job was causing their bodies to writhe along with the words, and after this privation, what was left behind was the words that contained ancient knowledge.

Being a person who lived in the world of knowledge and seeking, Kusla found some amusing congeniality with their unselfish praise and anguish. It seemed they wanted to convey their thoughts about why they had to suffer seeking what they wanted through these words.

Most likely, this mysterious looking light was the cause of such thoughts.

Kusla showed a little smile on his lips, and reached for the grape wine on the table, only to suddenly notice something. It was already so late that due to the cold, the dinner leftovers on the table had a white layer of fat coagulating upon it. Though Kusla was somewhat unwilling to call the latter his partner, the other alchemist Wayland had been spending a long time in the town for a long time.

There was also a person beside Kusla, having fallen asleep, drunk after tasting some wine.

Even in the midst of the alluring orange light, the whiteness of this mysterious girl was still as old as ever.

She was dressed in a habit, and it was said that she was admitted at quite a few monasteries. However, surely she was not a real sister, for she fell drunk

in an alchemist's workshop at a time vegetation remained in slumber.

Her clothes, skin and hair were all white. If her closed eyes were to be opened, one would be able to see an intriguing green. When coupled with the face befitting an ice sculpture, one could even assume her to be a magical puppet created by an alchemist.

The girl in slumber also had a unique, conspicuous characteristic.

She leaned upon Kusla, her head resting upon his shoulder. Perhaps she was unused to the sleeping posture, for those unique characteristics were twitching from time to time.

In this alchemist's workshop full of strangeness, decorated by skulls, the crystals shone within, and the ancient aged manuscripts—there was one of the seven deadly sins as recorded upon the Bible, the symbolism of the devil. The girl had ears of a beast, and she was a heretic, half human , half beast.

However, Kusla did not think her existence would cause a calamity in the world, nor that she was something rumored to appear at the end of the streets. At this moment, the girl was weeping silently in her sleep; only a person with a heart would cry.

Kusla moved his hand that was reached out to the grape wine towards her head, seemingly patting upon it.

He did not wipe her tears away, for no alchemist would be able to erase the tragic past this girl suffered.

That was why as an alchemist, Kusla could only protect her as much as he could.

He moved his eyes upon the ancient manuscript.

The candle continued to sway upon the water.

Act 1

“Still fuming?”

Kusla’s words were like the air exhaled in the frigid air, echoing and dissipating after a while.

And then, he heard the sounds of minerals being smashed.

“It’s just a little joke, you know?”

Smash

This time, a loud smash rang, and the mineral rock, the size of an armful, split in too.

“A little...joke?”

The being handing the hammer and chisel in front of the mineral rock slowly lifted her head.

It was a girl who on first glance resembled a little white furball.

Her pure white hair, coupled with the glittering emerald eyes below that looked extremely intriguing, made her a resemblance of an intricate doll.

Kusla had his hand pressing against his cheek at the work desk as he noted in a bothersome manner,

“...Well, whatever, maybe it differs from person.”

“You are the worst!”

Kusla did a concession through his own way, but she in turn turned her head slightly, her little fangs bared as she hissed at him.

“You...you made just a...vi-vile...!”

“...”

The pure white girl was probably not even half of his own mass, but Kusla averted his eyes from her.

However, he was not reflecting upon his actions.

“Such a huge fuss over nothing.”

The girl glared at Kusla over this absent-minded mutter, and bit her lips tightly, her body quivering. This reaction was already to be expected of her, but her emerald-like green eyes were gradually contorted.

“Huh? Hey, what are you crying—”

Perhaps Kusla said it too quickly as the face was no longer looking up, and she continued to immerse herself in the crushing of the minerals like it was a sworn enemy of her family. He understood clearly from that sight that she was more headstrong than the ores she was to smash.

Goodness gracious. Kusla scratched his head.

Due to a certain commotion that happened a month ago, the girl was hired as an assistant to the workshop in name. It was said she came here from a distant Southeastern desert. This place was the main battlefield of the continual war against pagans that devastated the world for more than 20 years, and the girl was adopted by the Choir of the Cladius Knights, a massive organization that obtained fortunes and authority, the leadership-granting entities. As part of this organization, the Choir is dubbed the Idyllic, yet the people gathered under it were definitely not some innocent, pious believer.

However, this girl, Ul Fenesis would definitely not care about this The girl’s race was persecuted before the war even began, and this continued through the purge that was the war that ravaged pagan grounds, until she was the only one left on this world. No matter the country, area, city, organization, they were all dubbed the ‘cursed blood’, vilified by the people, anyone who tried to reach out for them would be tried as demons. Of course, the Knights did not protect Fenesis out of compassion; they kept her by intending to use her cursed blood as an actual curse.

The commonly followed logic was that those involved with the cursed ones in any way were cursed themselves.

Such logic was foolish to the people who had ventured from city to city, but to those that lived in the one city or town for their entire lives, this was the best way to maintain order for the organization. Whenever a damaging act was done, the person would never be able to go back to his original standing again, and that would act as an example.

In other words, there were times where honor was more important than lives. And Fenesis was an existence that greatly defied the order of this world.

Now then, as for why would Fenesis be working at this workshop, or rather, why would Kusla's group be with her, there was naturally a reason for it. Kusla, watching over the obstinate Fenesis reluctantly, was an alchemist, an unorthodox profession of the world.

With a lethargic look, he sighed and opened the book. Of course, that book was such that it could be considered a precious thing, but in terms of rarity, Fenesis would possibly be much rarer than that.

The combination of white hair and green eyes was such a rarity the rich could throw a fortune for her. On top of those, there were other aspects like her beautiful face, serious, methodical and obedient personality. If it were a slave trader selling her from a faraway land, there was no doubt that she would fetch him a fortune.

However, whether it was her fortune or misfortune, , she did not end up on this path, but was taken in by the sinister organization, the Knights, as a cursed tool.

And with a stubborn look, she was smashing the minerals into small bits, her head shaking violently.

She would definitely put on a head veil whenever she headed out, restraining her ears as if she were punishing herself. That action was not simply because

she was afraid of others seeing it; perhaps she too felt that those ears were taboo to begin with.

If she were disciplining herself, Kusla would go out of his way to educate her; naturally, her self-reproaching posture showed no signs of joy.

Because of that, Kusla forbade her from wearing the veil in the workshop. While she was repulsed by the notion, she did not voice her refusal. It seemed she was uneasy with it during the first 2, 3 days, but at this point, she was completely used to it, and had a bandanna wrapped around her forehead to collect her hair together, and her downy hair shook.

The white fur covering her cat-like ears had a different gloss from her hair.

“Kusla.”

Kusla heard his name being called suddenly, and turned his eyes to the stairs leading to the upper level. It was rare for a few alchemists to be working together, but due to prior incidents, he was working together with his old friend Weyland in this workshop.

“I’m making a little trip to the harbor~.”

“Ah, yeah...huh? The harbor?”

“Ohohoho.”

Weyland, with his messy long hair and unkempt beard, resembled a bandit rather than an alchemist. The smirk he showed on his lips was akin to one wondering how to use the stolen treasure, but there were only a few reasons as to why alchemists would head to the harbor.

“What information is there?”

“Ohohoho.”

Weyland could no longer hide the grin on his face as he immediately turned away to leave.

And Kusla stared at the stairs that was devoid of presence, peeved as he stood up.

He held the handrail, still reeking of fresh timber, as he walked up the stairs. This workshop was burned by arson during the incident a month ago, and was only repaired a few days ago.

However, this place was meant to facilitate dangerous medicine and high temperature work, and as there was consideration for fire accidents during construction, the workshop was not as devastated as it looked on the outside, and repairs were quickly done.

It was only a week ago when the trio of Kusla, Weyland and Fenesis again met together after the incident. However, it felt as if they were very comfortable with this place, ostensibly living in this place for a long time.

Once he arrived at the upper level, he spotted Weyland excitedly preparing to leave.

Even if he wanted to inquire about the details, it was unlikely he would be able to get anything from an alchemist who is unwilling to state something.

“Speaking of which~.”

However, Weyland put on his coat, and unexpectedly spoke this time,

“Why is little Ul being so angry here~?”

“...Who knows?”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t understand your mischievous urge to tease girls you like~.”

“...”

It felt like leftover food that rotted and reeked..

At least, that was the expression Kusla showed Weyland..

“I just told her the old name of stalagmite, that kind of a little joke.”

“...Stalagmite? Ahh, those found in limestone caves, huh? Why teach her that~?”

“The old term of ‘that man thing’.”

The moment Kusla said that, Weyland ostensibly tried to recall as he carelessly looked over at the ceiling. After a while, his sight lands back on Kusla.

“...Little Ul really would recite it when she’s staying, huh~”

“Yeah. It’ll be quite a sight, dressed as a sister and reciting that ‘man thing’ over and over again.”

“...”

Weyland tried to give a surprised look, but stroked his chin gently as he spoke,

“To be honest, I would have liked to see that~.”

“I know, right?”

Kusla said, and Weyland gave a faint smile as he snorted, walking towards the entrance.

And then, he placed his hand on the door, saying,

“Well anyway, I won’t talk about your hobbies, but she’ll hate you if you force her too hard. You’ll lose everything if you like something to a point of being hated.”

“...Goodness, that’s unnecessary from you.”

Kusla himself was not intending to say such innocent words, that he did not have that sort of relationship with Fenesis.

To be honest however, the feelings he had for Fenesis was not carnal desire, but a protective desire, and instead of love, it was a possessive urge of his with regards to tools and knowledge.

Also, when thinking about Fenesis, Kusla would recall the sight of him taking care of a young bird who had set up next under the overhang of the roof of his old workshop. The parent bird met its demise after an attack from a cat, and he, in his impulse, raised the bird. This feeling he had was similar to back then; the bird had everything taken away due to a sudden accident, and would have died if left without care. In the end, the bird did not learn the basic skill of survival called flying. Surely Fenesis' circumstances was similar to the young bird back then.

But though Fenesis may be as foolish as a bird, her predicament was a lot more complicated than it. There was a decisive difference between them, that Kusla had an outstanding debt from Fenesis. This resulted in Kusla having a motive in reaching out to her, and making sure she did not deviate from her path.

And nonetheless, Fenesis was a girl who was easy on the eyes. Kusla would never think of devouring the the young bird he raised, but it would be a different issue if it were Fenesis.

Thus, Kusla was certain with regards to his attitude towards Fenesis.

The embodiment of this confusion was an expression of his desire for Fenesis to be able to survive on her own at this point, he would be troubled when Fenesis were to stand on her own and leave him.

To put it in direct terms, perhaps he wanted to be emotionally attached to her after all?

Kusla had a feeling that was the closest to the truth, yet it was somewhat off in some regards.

“...The second name of ‘Kusla’ (Interest) is being unable to cry.”

Kusla was a little astonished that he would actually ponder over such matters seriously, and with a sigh, he locked the door.

He then sealed the shutters that were opened for ventilation Though it was

winter, the morning sun was still very intense, and the room was unexpectedly bright due to the sunlight shining in despite the sealed shutters. There was a reason why Kusla deliberately locked the door once he informed Kusla of his departure. Even alchemists, so vilified by the world, would have an unexpected number of burglars visiting their workshops hoping to test their luck.

Alchemists were hired by people because they were versed in metallurgy and poison concoctions, and these techniques required a vast amount of money. If they were able to obtain the expertise, there was no doubt they would have an overwhelming advantage in the war, or would allow massive savings in military expenses. If there were new metallurgical knowledge obtain, it would be likely that the abandoned mines no one cared about could be revived and be highly productive.

Either way, such possibilities would require a massive amount of money, and things like human lives were insufficient in the face of this sum. There were a few who decided to smash the heads of the intellectuals and their intellectual property, and there were some who would eradicate them to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. In fact, the previous owner of this workshop, a highly skilled alchemist, was killed by his employer, and furthermore, the absurd reason was that the employer suspected the alchemist to be so overly skilled he would have revealed the corrupted practices.

Alchemists were humans who lived in such an environment, researching on metals and mineral ores.

They probably had various objectives, but the majority surely had their similarities.

Looking at the reasons why they were living in this damned world, there were those who wanted to chase their dreams, there were some who knew from the bottom of their hearts that no matter how much they persevered, God would never smile upon them, and there were some who thought that

since God would not smile upon them, they would devote their lives on their favorite things even if they had to risk their lives.

Thus, alchemists were idealists with dreams who would sacrifice their lives, honor and pride and humans.

And they called their dreams the land of Magdala.

Kusla too was no exception as he too yearned for the method to smith the metal of God called Orichalcum. Furthermore, he was seeking some things that were too preposterous.

And so, he wordlessly descended the stairs.

The workshop, built along the cliff, had its bedroom and kitchen facing the road, so it was possible to walk down the cliff to the lower level. While the lower level might be considered the basement, it had the best exposure to the sun because it was along the cliff, and there was a great view.

From the stairs, Kusla looked down at Fenesis at the workplace in the lower level, the equivalent of a basement, sitting on the woven mat as she smashed the minerals.

Her back was arched, smashing the minerals with fury. The same thing happened during first time when she did the refining work, as though she spent a lot of effort at first, her efficiency increased after Kusla told her to think of the person she hated when she smashed it.

The owner of this cute face certainly was resolute.

However, Kusla understood from back then that Fenesis was different from the bird, and that she was not the innocent kitten she appeared to be.

At any rate, due to her cursed blood, she had the experience of nobody reaching out to her, and her entire race massacred. She probably had such painful memories, and so she blindly looked for a place of acceptance to bury the loneliness that knew no bound. She always believed that no matter the

place, no matter how cruel the treatment she had, the loneliness could be buried as long as someone was willing to accept her.

And so, half the reason why Fenesis came to this place was undoubtedly because of the lack of choice. No matter how much she tried to refuse, once her superior gave the approval, she would surely end up forced to return to the workshop, just like the journey she had till this point. Kusla however would rather believe Fenesis came to this place out of her own wishes.

On a side note, Kusla was willing to take Fenesis in because the latter owed a debt to him. Because of Fenesis, Kusla (Interest), who was named as such because of him unable to view humans as humans, was finally able to notice that he was able to love after all.

But Kusla was definitely not a Saint, and naturally he took Fenesis for selfish reasons. Fenesis was a necessary ‘ingredient’ for his dream.

What he desired so painstakingly was the strength to protect those precious to him, and the ones worth protecting, in this damned world until the very end. The strength would be Orichalcum, and he felt Fenesis was a suitable candidate to protect using the sword of Orichalcum.

Of course, he knew very well how foolish those words were.

In fact, the Knights could not comprehend why Kusla would propose to keep Fenesis, not because they had no thoughts of passing the precious curse over, but that they never thought the eccentric, unscrupulous alchemist would allow himself to be shackled by the curse on the neck.

In any case, since he had the cursed girl with beast ears living with him, the Knights would have many reasons to assassinate him if they found him to be a hindrance, and they could block any unusual actions. When he went to pick Fenesis, the words of the Choir were to be expected,

Fools

Kusla could only shrug at that. There were many cunning Alchemists, but

few could be as wise as what the world would say.

If they could rationally weigh the costs, they would not be able to be alchemists.

However, Kusla sighed not because of that problematic issue alone. Another burdensome matter to him was that Fenesis was different from a young girl, and that her previous experiences left her unable to seek freedom.

She would only shed tears late into the night when she closed her eyes, and that was the decisive proof showing that the green eyes never looked at the front. Kusla had first assumed it was just her personality, but at this point, he firmly believed this issue was the source of the problem.

Fenesis herself never noticed these things, and she probably did not have any adults who would teach her these earnestly. Rather, the Choir who brought her in from a faraway land was merely thinking of using her.

Thus, the reason why Kusla told her the lewd joke and agitated her was not because he wanted to bully or tease her.

He just wanted Fenesis to notice her own problem.

He descended the stairs, arrived at the work desk with an opened, thick book, and went back to supervising Fenesis. Fenesis continued to smash the minerals for a while, and before long, she stopped.

“I am done with the smashing.”

The extremely monotonous tone seemed to be saying, *Do you want me to smash your head in too?*, but that itself was not a bad thing. If she was energetic, there would be a long my wounds and illnesses healed.

Back then, she was extremely moved, seemingly gaining a peace of mind when they were refining zinc back then, so she would be extremely serious when it came to doing such work. She was also unable to hide her elation with Kusla’s group were tasked with their current job from their employers,

the Knights.

Alchemists would often be tasked with researching on metallurgy, but from time to time, there would be a sudden onslaught of work that went beyond their call of duty. The work this time was to appraise the minerals that were confiscated by a neighboring governor from one of the merchant guilds passing through his land.

Alchemists would think that such boring work should be left to the craftsmen, but the Knights said to let the Alchemists, masters amongst the experts, to validate them, probably intending to get a favor from the governor.

The mineral taken in was a lead mineral called galena, and most of the rumors about Alchemist turning lead into gold was most probably related to this mineral.

In fact, whether a lead mine could be mined into would depend on the amounts of gold and silver that could be extracted from the produced lead. In other words, Kusla's group would have to appraise how much gold and silver was contained in the mines. The method for appraisal however had never been changed drastically since ancient times, and it was not difficult with the powerful technique of Cupellation. Thus, even Fenesis could do it.

Kusla left this work to Fenesis, which had the dual purpose of training the assistant that was hired in name.

“Pour the fragments into the sieve, and wash it with water.”

Fenesis was still fuming at the lewd words Kusla just said to her, but she followed his instructions and she began work accurately.

She had knowledge.

She read the book that was on the work desk with more enthusiasm than she did for the Bible.

It was a book written by a monk ‘Concerning metals’, a plain title.

It was the same book as the one Fenesis brought along the first time she entered this workshop, and once she decided that she wanted to come to this place, Kusla placed an order from the book merchant.

She probably knew that there was a decisive difference between putting the fragments into the sieve and washing it compared to washing beans.

The minerals differ in quality based on their compositions, and the rate they sink differ. By placing the minerals in water, the heavier lead would sink further than the other obstructing materials. With that, it would be possible to sieve out the non-lead bits.

Fenesis rolled up her sleeves, showing two slender arms as she arrived at the canal of water outside the house, washing the minerals with a splash. This would be refreshing work in the summer, but not in the winter as her arms were instantly frozen red. Perhaps the water was too icy as when she washed the minerals again, the sieving motion became dull.

Kusla intended to watch by the sidelines, but Fenesis’ lips were all purple, and she endured the pain, using the immobile fingers to pour the minerals into the sieve. When she tried to do it a third time using willpower, Kusla had enough, and got up from his chair.

No matter how terrified she was, Fenesis would head to the Alchemists’ workshop alone in the middle of the night as long as her superior ordered her. Looking at her personality, if she were ordered to do it alone, it seemed she would do this till she had frostbite.

“You can’t sieve it out by sinking minerals in water.”

Kusla said as he stood behind Fenesis while the latter was unaware, shocking her into nearly dropping was she was retrieving from the canal. He then reached his arms around her like an embrace, towards the sieve.



“The way to do this is not to be too strong with it. Shake it with this much strength from time to time.”

Fenesis’ anger probably was yet to subside, her body obviously frozen.

Kusla however did not mind as he shook the sieve, and then raised it from the water. Fenesis was surprised that he was able to do it so quickly, and was more amazed once she noticed the beautiful gloss on the lead and the other materials in the sieve, and then showed a look of regret.

“Also.”

He said to her while she was stumbling about, trying to move the iron pot of sieved material that was once in the water.

“The feeling of the fingertips is important enough to affect the outcome of refining. If you push yourself too much, you won’t get as much of what good results you may expect. Don’t forget.”

Fenesis headed indoors, and once placed the iron pot with a thud, Kusla, who entered at the same time, suddenly grabbed her hand. Her hand so frigid like ice it was heartbreaking.

She probably was still fuming as she wanted to retract her hand, but Kusla just would not let go.

She probably hated him again, and seemingly eking out a voice from her throat, she said,

“Let—”

Before she could say that however, Kusla stared at her, and said,

“Answer me.”

His tone caused Fenesis to quiver.

Her timid looking eyes ignited his sadism.

Though he was no Weyland, he too would inadvertently have to urge to tease

the girl.

But at this point, he had no ill intentions.

“Your answer?”

“...I-I...understand...”

“Carry on then.”

“...”

Kusla suddenly let go, and Fenesis brought her hands to her chest skeptically before nodding tentatively,

“The melting point for lead isn’t high. There’s no need to put in so much effort blowing it, but first, you need to have enough coal.”

She placed the iron pot into the furnace, her once frozen hands now exposed in front of the scorching fire. It seemed her nose was runny, probably because of the difference in temperatures, and she sniveled as she wiped her nose while working.

Once her nose stopped being runny, the color of the fire inside the furnace was just right, and the fragments on the iron pot was like a stew.

Lead was an interesting compound. When the lead filled with impurities reach melting point, by allowing it to cool, the pure lead will coagulate together. Once this layer of coagulated lead was sieved out, the impurities like gold and silver would increase in concentration.

Through the aforementioned process, the pot would be left only with impurities after repeating this process a few times. However, events in the world were not that simple; once the impurities are purified to a certain extent, the solidified lead would be mixed amongst them too.

With an iron ladle, Fenesis extracted the lead, then manned the bellows again to raise the temperate in the furnace, let it melt, cool it, and extracted the lead.

With the physical labor, the area in front of the furnace was a scorching hell. She took off the bandanna tying her hair as she wiped the sweat over and over again. Her ears suddenly twitched, and her sweat jumped off like fleas. However, it was probably futile to wipe it off with the bandanna, as she let it drip down, forming a puddle on the floor.

She only knew the basic properties of lead for this assignment, and Kusla could tell from his experience how much impurities there was. Once the sweat dripping down her chin had dried of, he patted her on the shoulder, “Right, you’re done with this work.”

“!...”

She looked intoxicated as she lifted her head at Kusla, and nodded with a blank look as she put down the iron ladle.

“Go make the ashes. There’s burnt items over there, so just smash them with a rod or something.”

She nodded obediently, and trotted off.

Rather than her anger from before being extinguished, it could be said that she was unable to be angry.

She sat down in front of the wooden box Kusla pointed at, and smashed the contents with a wooden bat. After seeing her work, Kusla returned to the upper level.

It seemed Fenesis had calmed down somewhat when he returned, and when she spotted him, she averted her eyes unhappily.

However, her astonishment seemed to overcome her discontent as Kusla placed a jug with a large handle beside her. And when he placed a little bisque plate with samples on it, her astonishment became intrigue.

“Try some, and have a drink.”

Kusla said curtly, and Fenesis looked over at him and the items a few times, frowning.

“It’s salt and water. You’ll faint if you continue to work like this.”

“...”

And after comparing Kusla against the placed items, Fenesis nodded vaguely.

She stopped crushing and mixing the contents of wooden box, took the jug, and sniffed it, ostensibly suspecting if it was wine. Once she realized it was water, she had a sudden sense of thirst, and closed her eyes, chugging down the water, only to choke on it immediately. Her throat was still unbearably parched as she continued to chug down.

Once she was done, she looked extremely blissful, in ecstasy, to a point where she forgot to wipe off the water on her lips. It was only when she made a burp did she show a bashful look.

Kusla said that there was salt on the plate, but she was still a little hesitant to lick it.

She took the plate, skeptical if it was really salt, but since Kusla ordered her to finish it before continuing, she inadvertently showed a sullen look.

However, she noticed an issue, how was she to finish up the salt on the plate? Her hands were dirtied due to the work, and for an instant, she glanced at the canal outside the house; however, he did already tell her to finish it up before continuing her work, and he might get angry if she were to go wash her hands. Thus, she could only lift the plate and lick it with her tongue, and hurriedly turned to the side when she seemingly noticed Kusla staring at her.

Kusla seemed amused by how she was acting like a little creature licking its food, but she probably would be utterly furious if his thoughts were to be made known.

She had a lot of sweat, so Kusla prepared a lot of salt for her. She however

licked it in no time, and after putting the little plate down, she chugged down the water again.

She then continued with her work, the flying dust causing her a huge sneeze.

She was preparing the ash required for Cupellation, and this was one of the reasons why an Alchemist's workshop had a dodgy presence to it.

Amongst the many tools and materials in an alchemist's workshop, the most noticeable would definitely be the bones.

Precious were the bones of large animals like bears and deer, for they were rare in quantity. There were also bones of smaller carnivorous animals like wolves and foxes, or bones of birds ranging from large ones to small ones like cranes, sparrows and quails. There were also times where they would use human bones, and some eccentric bones would try to steal the bones of the Saints from the Church for selfish use. Alchemists were not corrupted by the teachings of heretics, that their minds were befuddled, that they would commit sacrilege against God. The reason they did that was extremely simple, that other materials would often be added during metallurgy, and they would add bones to soften the metal when refining it, and burn them slowly.

But on an experimental scale, there was no need for Alchemists to use a vast amount of bones.

Now, as for why was there a need for so many bones adorned all over the workshop to a place where they are associated with Alchemists, that would be because they are required for Cupellation.

"They are, powdered."

There was a pause in Fenesis' words, probably because her nose was itchy.

Kusla then inspected the ash, nodded, and prompted Fenesis to proceed to the next step.

Fenesis then poured the ash in the wooden box to another iron pot, filling it

up. She drew a hole in the ash, and placed the pot beside the other pot with molten lead in it. While he quickly looked for the most suitable tool in the workshop for the next step.

Kusla inadvertently felt a little proud upon seeing her brisk actions.

Surely, such knowledge could not be obtained from studying, and she definitely had been looking around the workshop and affirming the steps in this experiment before the experiment began.

Though impressed, he could not deny that she was being too rigid.

Of course, being an Alchemist, he could not say could be this was a problem himself. Any person as meticulous as the fins of a water wheel could become a virtuoso Alchemist that could discover new things, as long as he had the curiosity. Certainly, there was no lack of such persons around.

Fenesis did not lack curiosity, and she, having affirmed the steps in the experiment, looked like a cat eyeing its prey as she waited for the next step.

But obviously, she lacked something.

While pondering over this, Kusla deduced the temperature from the air surrounding the newly added pot and the small amount of smoke rising from the ashes, and said,

“Pour the lead in.”

Fenesis nodded as she stared into the furnace.

Using a different long metal lade, she scooped the molten lead and poured it into the new pour. Intriguingly, the lead did not mix into the ash, instead flowing into the hole slowly.

Following that would be the step that gave Cupellation its name.

She cautiously poured all the lead into the lead, and once she was done, she took up the tool she prepared.

It was a fan made of thin animal leather, a tool meant to send air into the furnace, but it looked so small and feeble compared to the bellows. Though she should have read this up in a book beforehand, she still looked hesitant when holding the fan.

However, she began to fan timidly.

After the aforementioned method of increasing the impurities in the lead, she was to separate gold and silver from metals at the final phase through Cupellation.

This process was realized to such an extent, even Kusla felt that the technique was magical, and as far as he knew from the records, this process was so process there was nary a drastic change even after hundreds of years.

However, it seemed Fenesis' movements were a little rigid as she fanned; that was probably because she assumed the breeze coming from the fan was not too reliable, and that she was still somewhat skeptical of whether the recorded phenomena would actually happen.

The fanned breeze blew over the lead that piled on the ash, and after cooling, it formed a thin white membrane on the surface.

That was similar to the membrane formed when warm cow and goat milk were cooled.

The white substance was called Murdasang, a type of lead, and was commonly used for dyes.

However, the wonders of making such a material was that for some reason, this membrane was the only thing that mixed into the ash.

Fenesis' flank was ostensibly struck as she jolted in shock, probably surprised by the reality that was undoubtedly unfolding in front of her.

That white membrane was floating on the molten lead, like the hot air concentrated together, slowly seeping into the ash.

That was really an unbelievable sight.

It was a process of the molten lead being akin to a living thing, shedding its skin little by little.

Each layer was thin, but like the hidden truth within being revealed, the white Murdasang was actually, undoubtedly, revealed.

Fenesis sat in front of the furnace, her hands hold the fan as she concentrated on the fanning.

Soaked in sweat as she vented the air, her face was completely red, probably because of the direct exposure to the heat

However, she did not break away from this position.

Her expression was always so serious as she stared into the furnace, checking on the situation.

No matter the book, the secret to Cupellation was that the wind blowing at the lead could not be too strong. Otherwise, the strong winds would cause the lead to cool too quickly, and what would be formed would not be Murdasang, but simply lead itself.

By sending in the wind, the cooling would hasten, and thus, many wanted to cool it quickly to get the result.

Any human would have such thoughts.

However, while Fenesis was attracted by the results revealed in front of her, her hands just could not move quickly. She continued to watch the thin Murdasang membrane seep into the ash, not noticing the sweat trickling down her forehead, eyes and cheeks, and dripping from her chin.

Soon after, she finally stopped moving her hands, remaining still as she was absentmindedly entranced by this sight.

Kusla did not need to stand up to know what happened.

The truth was probably revealed when all the membranes were finally shed.

The gold and silver contained in the lead finally showed itself after all the crushing, washing, melting and isolation. It looked to be the exalted truth that would never be stained no matter the ordeal.

The ancients showed respect to such gold and silver by coining the term precious metals. Human beliefs would be shaken after setbacks, would tremble after being washed away, would be lost after melting, and would be easily betrayed by even the slightest of breezes after some teachings.

However, the pretty metals in the ash were different from this lead, and after much inspection, they would be left behind in its granular state.

Kusla got up, and Fenesis reacted sensitively to this sound, looking over at him.

She was showing an insecure look, seemingly about to break down into tears, but this was definitely not because Kusla was walking over to her. It was because the emotions in her heart were about to flow out due to the results in the furnace that were facing her.

Kusla stood beside her as he peered into the pot.

There was only granular bits of gold and silver left in the hole of ash, and the pretty grains were so full of glitter one had to wonder if they were still in molten state.

Kusla placed his hand on Fenesis' head.

Her head had become so hot it was ostensibly baked, probably due to her time in front of the furnace.

She let out a little snivel as she lowered her face, and Kusla gently patted her shoulder, saying,

“What did I just say?”

“...”

Fenesis again turned her head over to Kusla.

And that first was no longer filled with rage like how it was before.

“Your head will be boiled if you continue to stay in front of hot air like this. Also, there’s still a lot o lead left. In other words?”

Kusla asked, and Fenesis’ eyes were swimming, averting him as she continued to look at the middle of the ash, left with parting regrets.

However, she would obediently follow any order she was given.

She moved her body with much reluctance, took the jug, and drank the water.

“Let’s talk about what made you angry.”

The moment Kusla said this, Fenesis, who was chugging the water down her slender neck louder, had her ears prick nervously. Her cheeks were gradually becoming red, but perhaps this was not because she was in front of the furnace. *That man thing*, this was definitely the first time in her life that she said such a lewd term.

“You never understood my real intention, so I’ll tell you.”

“...”

The eyes filled with fury showed much skepticism, seemingly saying *you are just trying to throw me a smokescreen*.

However, Kusla did not back down. Surely the stare of a little lady like Fenesis would not cause him to.

And he was not joking; a brief look of the Cupellation work this time clearly indicated what Fenesis’ problem was.

“You have fallen into the trap of tunnel vision.”

“...”

“Tunnel vision. You understand? Tun-nel-vi-sion.”

Kusla said each part with emphasis and just when the headstrong Fenesis was about to argue back in protest.

“What do you intend to say when you don’t take care of yourself well?”

“...!”

Fenesis was a stubborn person, and those beast ears of hers would remain shut unless the reality was laid bare in front of her. Kusla got her to do this Cupellation experiment so that she could understand this undeniable fact.

“You have to always look at the big picture, and pay attention to many things. Only then are you able to take care of your own body, or rather, when you ask me about any terms you don’t know of, you won’t end up being teased by me by blindly believing me.”

“...”

Fenesis twitched her mouth over and over again, seemingly wanting to say something, but was unable to do so.

And Kusla said, saying,

“If you’re in an awkward situation of repeating that man’s thing with that damned serious look, just think of it as a funny story.”

“Bu-but that is—”

“But what will happen if it is a spell worshiping the devil? How do you intend to explain if anyone else is to hear it?”

And Fenesis, who was about to argue back, was left speechless.

This was not an exaggeration of a hypothesis. There were many who set such traps, and Fenesis must have felt distaste seeing people in her previous organization do such things.

“This is where you should be suspicious of the people around here. The Cupellation experiment you just did may have some dangerous minerals that

were mixed in, and the ones who would do such things aren't just those with ill intents. If you did the experiment as it was just now and ignore your surroundings, no number of lives would have saved you."

"..."

"God is unkind. It isn't rare to see poisons mixed in common mineral ores or buried underground. Alchemists are facing the unknown, and even if this isn't the case, you'll miss out on many things if you're too narrow visioned. You'll miss the good, and the bad."

"..."

Fenesis lowered her head, the sweat dripping from her bangs.

However, she still looked to be displeased.

"Are you trying to say that this is inevitable because you aren't used to the work?"

"I"

It seemed he hit the bulls-eye as she pulled her lips together.

And even so, she had her own virtues, that even though she was stubborn, she was serious in her work.

"...Yes."

She reluctantly replied with a whisper, and Kusla let out a sigh.

"Even I can't guarantee that I have any means to ensure your full safety."

For example, his dream to protect anyone fully.

"..."

Fenesis locked her lips tightly, probably not comprehending what he was trying to say here.

"But no matter the means, there are normally only two reasons why I can't

master such methods.”

“...That is.”

“One of the reasons is that the person’s an idiot.”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis widened her eyes, a loud thud ostensibly happening in front of her as she pull her chin in. Once Kusla stared at her dumbofounded eyes, she stubbornly pulled in her chin further.

It would be illogical not to tease such a person.

But this was not the time to be joking.

And Kusla stated briefly,

“The other reason is when there is no purpose.”

“Eh?”

In response to that brief surprised cry, Kusla stated again.

“Purpose.”

Fenesis definitely was not a fool, and that was apparent back when she accepted her superior’s orders and was unreasonably brought to the workshop in the middle of the night. She would be absentminded when doing some things, but her brain works rather quickly, and she would be able to determine what was dangerous, and what was not.

However, she had a tendency of losing her mind and being headstrong when it came to things she liked, to a point where it could be called self-abandonment. To begin with, her actions could easily have been interpreted as incoherent.

At first, Kusla assumed it was because she was being overly serious.

But he understood after seeing her weep silently as she slept in the middle of the night. He understood that people like Fenesis would sometimes do things incoherent with their objectives, and the majority of such people lost their

families to War and hunger, before being adopted by the knights.

The common theme they all had was that they did not have anything resembling a goal.

They were toyed too much by the illogical fates dealt to them, resulting in them being unable to find a meaningful goal coherent with their actions.

Kusla was able to tease Fenesis so easily, for every single thing she did was aimless and at random. He had some semblance of a protective urge over her, and the reason why he had such ill-fitting feelings for an Alchemist was because Fenesis seemed to be wandering around blindly in a dangerous place.

It would be fine if he were just bullying and teasing her.

However, Fenesis was a part of his one dream in life he gambled on.

He could not think of anyone else worth protecting on this world.

Fenesis was sweaty all over, like a lost girl wandering in town on a rainy day, and Kusla patiently noted to her,

“With a goal, you will focus your mind on the path leading towards your goal. You’ll know what you want to do, what you shouldn’t do, and the most important thing is that to achieve your goal, you have to treasure your life, no matter how much more you get to live. This is especially important for people like you and me.”

“...”

“It’s not too difficult; just treat yourself as important. When you do so, you’ll naturally notice many traps, and you won’t be bothered unnecessarily by any unnecessary things. For example, you don’t have to sacrifice your body for the Choir that wanted to use you as a cursed tool however they please.”

However, Fenesis frowned the moment she heard those words.

The problem was that she was not chiding Kusla, but that she was suffering.

It was something as a matter of fact, but to this girl, it was really difficult for her.

To put it on similar terms, the meaningful goal that would be coherent with her actions would be having ‘hope’.

Fenesis always wished to be accepted, but could she really say that she had such hopes when she executed the Choir’s orders? That could not be called hope; that was just her having a lack of options and filling her hunger as a result of that.

And when Fenesis lowered her head to give the answer, Kusla did not feel that she was being as unruly as a little child.

“But, I don’t think...you’re taking proper care of yourself...”

“Hm.”

Kusla nodded as he stroked his chin.

Alchemists were a collective of fools, and they would occasionally dwell into improbable danger.

But Kusla never lost his way.

He looked down at Fenesis, and said,

“Do you think you are?”

“...Huh?”

“You have to take care of everything about yourself, right?”

“...”

Fenesis widened her green eyes, and stared at Kusla blankly.

However, she quickly recovered as she glared at him, seemingly thinking that he intended to fool her again.

“Is that a body of flesh?”

“...”

Fenesis responded to his words with silence.

But he did not mind as he continued on,

“Should you not do experiments because you don’t want to lose your arms? To add on, do you not do it because you treasure your life? But this clearly goes against ‘my’ values. In other words, I’m not just a body of flesh.”

“...”

“But I’ll excuse myself from losing my hands that will cause me to lose my arms due to things that don’t involve experiments, because I won’t be able to do them. The same thing happens if I die, but if it’s to seek what I want to find, I’ll be prepared to offer my life in delight. This is what is meaningful to my life; the reason why I’m stunned after seeing you is because you’re risking yourself by doing meaningless things.”

Fenesis stared at Kusla, her face ostensibly teary.

And he continued on with an emotionless face.

“Everything is weighed against my objectives on a scale, and I’m that scale weighing everything. Where is your scale? What shape is it? What are you going measure on it? I really,”

And he poked a finger on Fenesis’ forehead.

The completely weary Fenesis stumbled backwards.

Perhaps she had no intention of resisting in her heart.

“Am unable to see that scale.”

Fenesis rubbed her forehead as she stared at Kusla.

Her eyes looked ready to break into tears. She was not a girl troubled because of anger; she was a young girl who continued to seek her parents, and could not be left alone. She was a girl who was unable to find whatever was

important to her no matter how she tried.

Kusla felt that perhaps the curiosity Fenesis had towards smelting would be a scale for her. However, she at this point was merely delighted to see new things. Nowhere would such a diabolic objective be found in the world of alchemy.

However, Kusla's opinion was that she just wanted to do things through ostentation and disposition. Ostentation and disposition were always simply ways to justify their existences through their 'ideal selves'. In other words, behind this thin membrane disposition and stubbornness would be a Fenesis who had lost herself, just that she had yet to discover it, or that she had not awoke.

Also, he felt that once Fenesis was able to regain something that belonged to her, he would be able to properly evaluate his attitude towards her for the first time.

His dream of protecting someone using the sword of Orichalcum would offer lots of options.

For example, to be a big bird protecting a little bird, or to be a knight protecting his beloved princess.

Nonetheless, he did not think of any setbacks he would encounter in his quest to attain his dream.

And so, he said with conviction,

“Well, I can't be pessimistic about this.”

Naturally, Fenesis did not understand the meaning behind these words.

With Kusla having pointed out all her weaknesses so brazenly, she could not help but look at him skeptically.

“Don't show such a look. You'll only get an unreliable answer if you do that, and that's why you were used by organizations like the Knights' Choir, or

that you devoted yourself to the unnecessary metallurgy work to a point of risking your life.”

He pinched Fenesis’ face, and rubbed it around.

“Of course, I know this isn’t something that can be accomplished so quickly, but after hearing me out, do you at least understand your own problem in some way?”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis, not resisting despite her face being pinched, finally nodded.

“Even if you have to find yourself, your *raison d’etre*.”

“My...”

“Now then, that’s it for that day. There’s still lots of lead, and lots of fuel here. Just work until noon.”

“...”

“Your reply?”

“U-Understood.”

Fenesis answered, and grabbed her work clothes tightly.

“What’s the matter?”

If you have anything to say, just say so now that was the tone Kusla spoke with, but Fenesis averted her eyes and shook her head slightly.

He let out a sigh, and said curtly,

“Say it.”

Fenesis jolted in fear, and cringed back.

After some silence, she quickly said,

“E-erm, sorry.”

And then, she returned to her work in a frenzy.

Kusla watched her actions, and shrugged his shoulders as he continued to dwell in the book he was to read.

She lost her way, but she was so earnest and serious.

Such a troublesome person He wondered as he rested his chin in his hand.

—

A guest visited the workshop at the time when when Fenesis was done pouring the last bit of lead onto the ash.

Most of the time, it would be a bad thing for an Alchemist's door to be knocked on, but once he heard that the knock was the code only members of the Knights would know of, he realized that wasn't the case.

“This is the cargo the Knights sent.”

A boy slightly taller than Fenesis said this as he handed over a sealed parchment.

He wore a hat made of rabbit fur that was over his eyes, and his clothes comprised of layers of hard hemp, the hemming comprising of coarse, hard wolf fur or some other animal, giving the impression of a rectangle.

Accompanying this boy was a mule carrying a hill-like pile of goods.

He was a typical courier that came from the hills, but in fact, he was a special courier hired by the Knights. Though he may appeared this way, he usually carried items valuable enough to build a house, and it would be impossible to think of this boy ferrying such baggage around. Of course, whenever he moved, one could see the weapons hidden under those few layers of hemp.

“Let's verify.”

“So do I move the goods in?”

His physique was similar to Fenesis, but it was apparent from his eyes and verbal mannerism that his composure was not something Fenesis could compare to. One might even say he had a pessimistic vibe about him.

“I’ll leave it to you.” Kusla said, and the courier nodded slightly, immediately removing the knots on the mule and moving the goods.

It was likely every single item the boy moved from the mule’s back was valuable, but he managed to spread the weight of the items evenly through a unique package method. Kusla could not help but marvel that this was a person hired by the Knights, and at the same time, he noticed that the boy’s stare was focused on a single point whenever he moved the items into the workshop.

He looked over at where the boy was looking, and saw that Fenesis was standing at the stairs, poking her head out.

“I am...done with work.”

“Then have a little break.”

And Fenesis nodded in response to Kusla’s instructions.

She wanted to return to the lower levels, but Kusla could tell that she was very interested in the items that were being moved in.

Surely this person really was too innocent for not being willing to state this.

“...Just don’t get in the way.”

After hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis cringed her body back like a prank being discovered, but she nodded and remained on the first level.

“What’s the matter?”

And so, Kusla directed those words at the boy who stopped moving.

This distrustful boy clearly was a person of the hills, and he put down the items in surprise before returning back to work. It was definitely not Fenesis’ wish to be so careless as to reveal her beast ears, but Kusla was a little flustered after seeing the boy’s reaction.

Perhaps she should have covered her ears, and even her face after all?

No matter what he did, Weyland would always try not to get too close with Fenesis, for he knew that if he got into a dispute with Kusla, it would end up with quite the troublesome result.

However, there was no way he would brag about such a matter to all the people in the world.

In any case, there were people amongst the fellow ranks of the Knights who were not intimidated of Alchemists.

And the boy, one such person, was especially difficult to deal with.

Kusla did not intend to do anything Fenesis at this point, *that is mine*, but he had quite a possessive streak of

Just when he was pondering about such matters, Fenesis picked up the jug she had finished, and was about to head to the kitchen when she suddenly turned around.

“Oh? The goods from that side has come~”

A familiar voice rang, and Kusla turned around to find Weyland, who had just gone to harbor.

The courier boy took a step back, ostensibly taken aback by Weyland’s presence as the latter pressed himself on the cargo tied onto the mule’s back.

Delivered to the duo were the minerals Weyland requested as reward for the previous incident, and surely, his satisfaction was to be expected.

But Kusla had a bad premonition after hearing the neighing of the horse on the path, and looked over.

And then, he found that what stunned the boy was not Weyland, but a horse that was waiting behind.

“Hey, what’s with that?”

“Hm? Ah, this huh? Ohohoho.”

Weyland, dressed like a bandit, was snickering away, seemingly plotting a conspiracy.

It seemed that good-for-nothing was up to no good, evidenced by the earnestly perturbed face of the youth who lead the horse to this place,

“That’s quite a lot...good’s from some firm?”

“It looks like they’re going to sell it somewhere north. There’s a lot of new stuff, so I borrowed it for the time being.”

And Weyland, who was rubbing his face on the mule’s items, ordered the boy to move the books he seized from the port into the workshop.

It was unknown whether the youth was to move the goods from the harbored ship to the guild, or that he was in charge of unloading; one thing for certain was that it was not his intention to be at this place, but he could only follow Weyland’s orders reluctantly.

For any person in the town, an encounter with an alchemist would be akin to encountering a natural disaster.

If he were to resist however, one had to wonder how the Knights, having dominion over this town’s authority, would react; thus, he could only obey, wait for the disaster to pass, and ponder over how to solve the problem.

Nonetheless, once the youth return back, he would surely be met with a stern rebuke.

The value of the books that were tied recklessly onto the horse’ back would probably be no less than the items the boy brought over. If he were to lose one, the youth’s pay would be docked.

And at this point, the firm that lost its books would definitely be in a frenzy.

“...Erm.”

Kusla looked back, and saw Fenesis giving an impatient look.”

“What are those things?”

“The crystallization of of Weyland’s self-indulgence.”

“Fuel that’s needed to continue on~”

In response to Weyland expressing his delight, Fenesis showed a face of one enduring a blunt trauma.

As an Alchemist, Weyland was more honed than Kusla.

Despite not know what he was thinking, one could easily guess where Weyland’s thoughts were developing to.

And to Fenesis who was told to find herself, he probably was a dazzling existence.

To Kusla however, Weyland’s actions were truly unorthodox. The precious minerals and books were crammed into the already packed workshop; surely there had to be a little to greed.

Kusla first cleared up the legal goods that were transported from the Knights, for he sensed that he could not deal with the books.

“...Gold ores, silver ores, copper ores...high quality ones from all the lands...?”

Kusla affirmed the invoice in his hand from top to bottom, and Weyland moved the wooden boxes in before prying them violently.

Weyland had completely cast aside the books he robbed from the harbor, and the youth who was done with his ferrying gave a skeptical look, wondering if he could head back; “Good work” Kusla could only say so with reluctance, and the youth gave him a vengeful look before returning back with the horse.

Why hate me? Kusla was a little perplexed by that.

“Quartz, Chalcedony, Topaz, Jasper, Agate, Malachite...you really are being greedy here.”

The second invoice listed precious stones, luxury goods one would find a waste to use all on experiments.

“The ones left are what you really want, right?”

Even the boy, who remained unmoved to anything till this point, cringed his neck slightly once the wooden box of items bundled most securely was mentioned.

“Sulfur, Realgar, Cinnabar and Stibnite, huh?”

They were crystals of arsenic, rocks containing the potent poison called mercury that was dubbed ‘Killer of Clergymen’.

No matter how this item was harvested, it would be poisonous, and for various reasons, certain governors would be rather familiar with such things. It could be a tool to kill political opponents, or to be used when traitors are aiming to take their lives.

Based on the aforementioned scenarios, typical governors would not allow the distribution of such materials even if they were simply used for experiments.

Kusla’s group managed to fish out from the town a Knights’ executive who had been hoarding wealth in the previous incident, and the Knights did not haggle regarding the rewards they demanded. Kusla requested to take in Fenesis, and Weyland wanted rare experiment materials that would normally not be obtained. Naturally, this reality could be seen from this invoice.

Kusla flipped through the invoices, and his wry smile that was due to Weyland’s greed faded away.

For an instant, he could not comprehend the last line.

“...This is.”

Kusla lifted his eyes, and at the same time, Weyland lifted his head.

Immediately afterwards, the courier boy let out a brief sound as he escaped

through the window.

Surely he did not escape because he had a guilty conscience.

The boy was trained as a courier of valuable goods that he was to immediately escape once he noticed any unrest brewing. This was a different matter altogether.

“What in the world is this...?”

“It says that the Cinnabar and Stibnite will be withheld for now.”

Kusla waved the invoice as he said, and Weyland got up abruptly.

“Going to express your complaints?”

Weyland strode out before Kusla could finish his question.

“Ah, hey, wait fo—”

But Weylands profile quickly vanished.

And Kusla made a sour look.

The written contents on the invoice was basically stating that the highly controversial poisons were held back for the time being.

It did not seem to be a lack of reserves. Clearly, it was an arbitrary decision.

Alchemists could not live on if they were belittled.

If they were to kneel in front of others, they would be demanded to grovel the next time. If they relax even once, they would be used, and what would happen if they were used? Fenesis would be a classic example of this.

Weyland was able to instinctively understand the situation.

Of course, Kusla too felt the same.

However, he stopped himself from chasing after Weyland, for he noticed Fenesis, who was looking perplexed. Having finished such manually taxing work, Kusla was afraid of bringing her into the town. If Weyland was to head

to the supervisor alone, one had to wonder what sort of a commotion he would cause.

It would be one thing if Weyland was working by himself, but he was working with Kusla himself in the same workshop, and though the latter did not wish for it, the former's actions would affect him.

Kusla immediately weighed the costs, and looked back at Fenesis, who was staring at him perplexedly.

"I'll be out for a while. Don't ever touch these things."

"Hm? Ah, yes, okay."

"And then,"

He turned his back to the window, minding the situation behind him, and said,

"You're to stay in the lower level until we come back; take a nap. Don't come upstairs."

"Eh?"

"You understand?"

"...!"

Fenesis nodded, seemingly overwhelmed by Kusla's pressure.

The latter gave her a distrustful look, *Do you really understand?*

And Fenesis, seemingly understood instinctively that she was not being trusted, pulled her lips in. Of course, that was what Kusla was aiming for. It was easy dealing with people who were overwhelmed.

"I'll be back soon."

And after saying that, he went out, locking the door from the outside.

The boy was not too far away as he looked over at Kusla.

He looked extremely displeased, perturbed; surely he knew a mistake in his work would affect his credibility.

Nevertheless, Kusla waved at the boy, and the latter blinked hesitantly before heading over obediently.

“This is for you. Wait here.”

Once he said this, Kusla took a silver coin from his pocket and pushed it into the boy’s hand.

“...?”

The eyes of the reticent boy’s showed intrigue that appeared to outstrip his delight exceedingly, but he did not push the coin back. Most people would push the coin away in such situations, but it seemed the collective understanding of them being fellow Knights members was at work here.

“Don’t let anyone inside. That includes you as well.”

“...”

“Wait for use to come back, and you’ll get another one. Of course, I’ll send a note as to why you’re late during work.”

Kusla stared right into the boy’s eyes.

The latter stared at the coin in his hands, and then looked over at Kusla.

The pitch black eyes looked to be exceedingly proficient in weighing the benefits and costs rationally.

“What about talking?”

And the boy asked.

Perhaps he realized Kusla had concerns over something.

“If you want to die, that is.”

The boy immediately showed a smile befitting of his age, shrugged, and

placed the silver coin into his pocket.

“Command received.”

“You’ll go far in life.”

The boy again showed a smile, only to revert back to being a person of the hills with much doubt the next moment.

Surely this was to be expected of a talent handpicked by the Knights.

Kusla patted the boy on the shoulder, and went down the path to chase after Weyland.

—

The port town of Gulbetty remained bustling on this day, and there were carriages loaded with goods, the young errand boys dragging their mules to deliver the goods to the workshop, and so on.

The weather had been clear the past few days, so the sea surface was tranquil, and many ships were docked at the harbor or loading their decks with goods before moving out. If one were to stand at the bar beside the docks for a day, he would be able to see a lot of goods loaded and unloaded, like large bellows expanding and contracting.

Kusla quickly strode through the bustling streets to chase after Weyland. As an alchemist, Weyland was able to make it this far, and in fact, there was nothing to worry about him if he were to head out alone. However, the premise would be if he were an alchemist who owned his own workshop.

And even if that was not the case, Kusla and Weyland had differing goals, so the latter’s one-sided decisions would not necessarily benefit Kusla, and he probably did not have the term ‘teamwork’ in his heart; only the weighing of profit and loss.

Of course, Kusla did not chide him for this, for in this world, they would not live long if they were to abide by God’s law.

Most likely, even if they did not collaborate, that would be their own lives. Perhaps it would be the reason why they would simply live for their own sake after all.

However, Kusla had his own worries when he chased after Weyland.

They managed to unmask the man who had been siphoning the funds from the Knights back then due to luck, but even so, they did managed to make contributions. The Knights should be rewarding them, and they probably would.

Of course, it would be a different case altogether if they did not obtain Cinnabar and Sitbnite due to a lack of resources, but Kusla had a feeling that was not the case.

The Knights appeared to be simply going back on their word, rescinding what they do and leaving others to dry. Naturally, Kusla's first reaction was fury, yet at the same time, surprise.

This was the workshop at the frontlines, and surely there had to be total freedom where they could do whatever they wanted. The research results of the Alchemists could affect the quality of the iron used for metal, the quality of the weapons, and affect production as a whole, so there was no reason for the Knights to anger the Alchemists. The local leaders and the Church were also participating in the war against the pagans, and they would wear each other's military might. Imperative are the production of weapons, the seizing of the mines in pagan lands, and the retention efficiency of metals in this War.

Because of this, Alchemists allowed themselves to be controlled because they were allowed to do whatever they pleased so that the Knights were able to reap the benefits. While it was assumed the latter would do this, this scenario felt a little abrupt.

At this point, Kusla felt a different atmosphere.

He lifted his nose at the cloudless, clear sky; there was moisture in the wind,

probably an arriving storm.

In other words, there was one possibility of him being similar to the floating logs on the sea...

While pondering over such things, he caught up to Weyland, who was in front of the Baggage Corps.

“What are you folks doing!?”

Growls could be heard as the guards wearing helmets, gauntlets and breastplate, raising their spears as they blocked the path.

The instance they raised the question, Kusla began to feel his worries were justified.

Though there were guards when the group revealed the conspiracy by the previous Baggage Corps leader Alan Post, they were never this pretentious.

What was placed in their rooms were decided by their owner’s liking.

At this point, the occupants of this building were the kind who would display their splendour.

Also, most of those that would focus on such aspects were easily agitated.

“That’s my line~!”

Weyland said as he grabbed the spear. It seemed the soldiers wanted to push forth with strength, but they were rendered unstable, their footage seemingly gone due to Weyland’s little push, and they collapsed so awkwardly. Having collapsed, they looked up at Weyland blankly while the latter held the spear.

Even in the bustling port town, this was the road where money and power was most concentrated.

Furthermore, fluttering in front of the building was the flag with the insignia of the Knights, rulers of the world.

Many turned their stares over, and though they did, they did not dare step

forth.

If anything were to happen to them, and if they were assumed to have any relation with the commotion, they would have no standing in the town from the next day onwards.

Weyland tossed aside the spear, and violently pushed aside the thick doors.

And Kusla could only follow him into the building from behind.

“Eh...”

There was an elderly white-bearded man carrying a pile of parchment scrolls, and he let out a little surprised cry when he saw the intruders barge in. It seemed that he was still working, and beside him was a petite apprentice who was holding something large, akin to a map. Both master and disciple were shocked, but Weyland did not pay heed as he continued on, knocking hard into the shoulder of the old man that was standing on the corridor.

The man did not fall over, but his body did stumble slightly.

Kusla stepped forth while the man was about to shout, and placed a silver coin on the bundle of parchments.

“Sorry. Please pardon us.”

And then, he gave a nod before leaving.

The elderly man, who was about to yell for the guards, left his mouth ajar in shock.

This tact managed to handle the situation easily.

Upon seeing weyland push the office doors aside without knocking, Kusla felt a little tense as he took a deep breath.

“We got to talk.”

Weyland went straight to the point without stopping in his tracks.

He was standing in front of a young, skinny man, with a waiting servant,

writing something on a parchment with neatly trimmed corners. The man was the one sent by the Knights to replace Post, and if he remembered correctly, the name was El Autris. That man looked to be completely compliant to the organization's orders, and he did give a peeved look when Kusla's group came over to greet him.

However, he did affirm the identities of Kusla's group and agreed to the freedom of research in the workshop back then, so there was nary a huge commotion. Also, he did not seem to be the type to get involved with problematic matters.

Everything that could be seen in the office was orderly. It seemed he liked to straighten his back and glare down at others, but this caused Kusla's group to feel relieved about it.

They did not pay much attention after the salutations, for they originally assumed he would be something to be trifled with. It seemed this little carelessness caused them quite the hassle however,

“...Follow the rest as per orders.”

“...Understood.”

Autris hushed his voice, and the servant followed suit. This hushed conversation indicated that such situations were a common occurrence.

The servant passed by Kusla and Weyland, ostensibly missing their presences, and even lowered his head politely to his master. Kusla kept looking at the servant, while Weyland stared at Autris.

Neither side could allow themselves to avert their eyes for even a single moment; Weyland aside, even Kusla would assume this.

This chemistry was established from their apprenticeship, when they were poisoning each other's meals; Kusla felt a little nostalgic about this.

“Now then, what is with this unexpected visit?”



Autris said as he fiddled with a sand pot ornamented with gold. To dry the ink quickly, the excess was to be absorbed by the sand.

However, Weyland's reaction was never as long as the ink. He stamped his foot on the desk, and kicked the feather pen off the table top.

"Tell me, the reason. If I am satisfied, I will go back."

I, will, kill, you.

Kusla recalled the common sight of pagan prisoners being led around the streets and merely stating such prattle.

"..."

Autris merely straightened, the feather pen, and let out a sigh.

And then, he said,

"There is a limit to the budget. I cannot simply increase it whenever I like to."

Weyland did not respond.

Autris showed no fear as he continued on,

"I do sincerely apologize for not being able to grant what you wish as promised. I do feel miserable for not meeting your expectations."

A barefaced lie.

Kusla muttered in his heart, and Autris continued on,

"However, I did attain this position on orders from my superiors. Now then, do you not mind pondering from this aspect, why are you assigned to that workshop? Where do your research fees come from? Whose authority is it that you are protected from the heretical inquisition?"

This lecture was no different from a scolding to an impetulant child, and he had completely deemed them as fools.

Perhaps this was a case of who were the rulers, and who were the ruled.

Even if he did not say so, having gone to jail many times and meeting many illogically harsh treatments, the concept called the world's order was long ingrained into the minds of Kusla's company. No matter how much they pretended to be ruffians, Alchemists could never forget this logic. It was tragic, but it was reality.

Austris showed no signs of stepping aside. His predecessor was a war-hardened person who was exceptional in his work, only to be a wealth-grubber in private, and the Knights would definitely not send a person with shady personality over.

He was the guardian of order.

Kusla watched Weyland's back with a bitter look.

"Of course, if you do have a breakthrough with regards to the smelting of metal, and if the fuel used for refining or the quality of the produced metals are improved, we will increase the budget accordingly. I did hear that your predecessor was an outstanding Alchemist, no?"

Once Austris was done, there was an abrupt silence.

What would they do?

Threaten him?

However, Austris did seize the initiative from right under their noses, and it could not be assumed that a threat at this point would have work.

Even so, Weyland did have his own pride. The most important aspect for an Alchemist was that they were not to be underestimated.

Even when Kusla was pondering about this, he was spontaneously balancing the costs of whether he should use forceful means along with Weyland. If they did naively think of this as an act of betrayal, they would never be able to be Alchemists.

People with differing goals would ultimately be acquainted, even if they had old relations.

Alchemists would merely head towards their goal earnestly .

“Understood. I’ll head back~.”

And so, Weyland suddenly said this, dragging his voice at the end like usual. He then turned around and walked out. His actions were overly spontaneous to a point where Kusla was left flabbergasted.

Autris too did show the same reaction, and it did seem he expected them to show some resistance at least.

However, when Kusla caught up to Weyland’s back, he noticed the surrounding atmosphere. There was an ominous feeling to the stroll, a presence of the cold, frozen order and the eternally continuing daily life.

While Kusla let out an annoyed snort, Weyland’s mutter reached his ears.

“This really is a bad thing~...”

Kusla assumed that he had misheard, but Weyland’s face was inexorable.

Perhaps Weyland was saying that it was troublesome to have to kill someone who belittled him after all, but Kusla did not intend to pursue the matter further. There was nothing Weyland would not do.

Weyland stroked his chin as he walked, an action he would do when experimenting, and muttered,

“It seems the story about the crest of Azami is true~...”

Azami?

Kusla nearly misheard it, and was taken aback.

“Azami...don’t tell me it’s that.”

After hearing Kusla’s query, Weyland quickly narrowed his eyes as he turned

his face around.

“Yes, it’s that~...”

Weyland’s affirmation allowed Kusla to understand the former’s willingness to back down.

It would be warm if they were to stand outside under the sun, but the building caused the winter air to be frigid, thoroughly chilling. Kusla felt as if it was something pressing upon him, and inadvertently shivered.

“The flames in the refineries here are going to be extinguished~”

Weyland’s soft voice echoed intriguingly in this quiet building devoid of any human presence.

Act 2

Kusla and Weyland had a late lunch at the open-air market, and returned to the workshop. They brought along some salt and garlic bacon, 3 large Pilchards that were wrapped in bark and steamed, some bread, and also grape wine in a wineskin. Kusla handed a bun and Pilchard along with some silver coins to the boy who obediently waited in front of the workshop. The boy accepted it silently without a word of thanks, but he ate without being wary at all.

The boy wolfed down his meal, the social awkwardness of his actions so dainty in some sense.

While Kusla had such a notion, Fenesis sat at the table where the Pilchard was laid on, and clapped her hands together, praying, yet showed no intention to eat at all, and Kusla thought,

I really want to tease these two.

“Now then, what do we do?”

Kusla said as he cut the bread with a dagger, and sandwiched a piece of bacon as large as his hand. The stinging scent of garlic and the taste of the fat caused Fenesis, still praying with her eyes closed, to bend a ear in annoyance.

“We going to suck up to that Autris?”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Weyland gave him a weary look, and stabbed the dagger into the bread as Kusla did.

“Enough with the useless ideas~”

“...Well, I guess it’s pointless. We can forget about eliminating him too.”

“We’re all existences in the palm of the Knights after all~”

Weyland said, and did not draw out the dagger from the bread, instead cupping his hands behind his head as he looked up at the ceiling. Meal time

did not seem to be a necessity to him.

In fact, the issue that frustrated Kusla and Weyland was certainly more important than the meal in front of them, in the sense that their livelihoods were at stake.

“So there’s some bearing to the rumor about the Crest of Azami?”

Kusla asked, and Weyland continued to tilt his head up with his eyes closed, answering,

“There’s no mistake about it. Somebody booked a large inn in a central city of the Tsranda Republic located to the South, and the inns doors had the Azami Crests placed on them...you probably would understand after seeing the books I stole. The Guild is selling to the North because a new workshop is going to be built.”

Weyland bluntly admitted that the books were stolen, but Kusla did not go further into that, asking,

“I’m not asking about what the rumors are. I want to know how reliable they are.”

Once Kusla said that, Weyland looked a little annoyed, and said,

“I can have a talk with the birds at night~”

As I had expected, Kusla sighed,

Conversing with the birds at night would mean that Weyland got his information from a prostitute.

“The Crest of Azami will definitely come to this town...and they aren’t aiming here, but further North...”

Further North...in that case, they only have one destination, right?”

“Yeah.”

Weyland answered, and relaxed his hands as he returned to his usual posture.

“The largest town of minerals the Pagans have, Kazan. There are often rumors that it has fallen~. I guess we have some actual conclusion now.”

“Kazan...?”

Kusla gasped as he muttered.

There were too many things running through his mind, a fair share of what he had to think of.

At this moment, Kusla noticed Fenesis staring coldly at the now cold Pilchard, her hands not moving at all. He initially assumed that Fenesis was pouting because they were talking about some matters she did not understand, but her face was not looking disgruntled in any means, merely showing some uneasiness on her face.

Before she was adopted by the Knights, she was a wanderer along with her tribe, venturing through numerous cities, only to be persecuted, and she was the last one left behind. A language communication breakdown meant that she did not know who was the enemy, and who was her ally, so being unable to understand their conversation probably meant the same thing to her.

Once she began to realize this, she began to feel uneasy, but was unable to interject into their conversation, so she could only use her little hands to pick out the little bones, the sight of it so pitiful it was infuriating.

If you’re uneasy about this, just say it. Take action for ‘your own sake’.

Kulsa took a bite of bread, chewed on it along with the bacon, and said,

“We’ve been had by our boss.”

But Fenesis was a stubborn person herself. If Kusla was worried about her, he would have to pretend not to pay her any attention.

And so, to pretend that he was aloof, Kusla said as he curtly picked the tendon stuck between his teeth for the sake of it.

“This town’s the frontline in the war against the Pagans, so we can do

whatever we want for our research. This normally isn't the place for us young Alchemists to be at, but given the inexplicable death of our predecessor, anyone sent here might end up killed too. Because of that, we could come here if we're prepared to bear the risk."

The bacon was delicious, but his throat was parched.

Kusla licked the grease off his fingers, and raised the wineskin to gulp down the wine within.

"But the one who had our predecessor killed was actually one of our own, and he did it for personal gain. Since we managed to fish out the culprit splendidly, it can be assumed that we would be able to enjoy our freedom."

Fenesis did not make a sound, but her hands stopped as she stared at Kusla.

"But the Knights really are a bunch of sly foxes. In a little while, this place will no longer be the frontlines where we can do whatever we want. There is a city north of here called Kazan, said to be the largest base set by the Pagans. Once that place is conquered and used as a base, Kazan will undoubtedly be the frontlines for the final crusade, so the refineries will be moved there, and the refineries here will have to shut down."

If this was no longer the frontlines, what would happen next?

The shackle called Order would happen.

"The minerals that should arrive were detained, so we went to voice our complaints. They said that they refused to deliver because of a lack of budget, so they could not proceed with the request. In that sense, the ideal workshop that was supposedly part of our reward for bearing the risk of getting killed at any given moment is just a sham."

"..."

"That's why we're discussing about what to do after this...right?"

Kusla looked at Weyland, and the latter remained seated on the chair, his

head lowered as though he was dozing off.

He stabbed the dagger into the bread for the umpteenth time, cutting it until it was completely crumbled.

Perhaps he too was thinking of what to do with all his might.

“...”

Weyland did not answer Kusla’s words.

Kusla shrugged, and said to Fenesis,

“Even if we are to stay here, we will be forced to do some boring stuff. I can’t tolerate the idea of living such a life until I die of old age.”

“B-but.”

Fenesis stammered as she interjected.

“You can...do lots of experiments, right”

She was a caged bird who scampered around various cities just to survive, and finally landed in a monastery.

For her, who was viewed and used as a cursed item, how an Alchemist was treated did not appear to be that bad.

“Of course, we can continue to research however we want here, but Alchemists are not as free as what you say.”

“...Hm?”

Fenesis frowned tentatively. The reason why Kusla had urges to tease Fenesis was because he would see the latter’s obstinate side whenever he teased her from time to time.

“You look...rather free...”

“Hm, it’s just a matter of the cage’s size.”

Kusla drank some wine, and burped,

“We can move freely in the town, but we cannot leave it freely. Our fortunes are the knowledge in our head, and once we go somewhere else, this knowledge will become disadvantageous to the Knights, and such knowledge will quickly spread, so the Knights are terrified of Alchemists leaving the cities, sanctioning them from doing so. Alchemists are never allowed to suddenly leave a city. In terms of understanding the landscape of the world, you are more knowledgeable than us.”

Kusla gave Fenesi a somewhat self-deprecating look, and the latter obviously looked perplexed. She probably assumed Kusla was taking her for a fool, teasing her again, and did not know how to answer.

“Alchemists complete the tasks assigned to them in their designated towns by their superiors, and slowly gain trust. They will then be assigned to large cities, or bustling towns, and as their scope of research will increase, the amount of knowledge they can gather will increase. In any case, our fates are bound down to the towns we are assigned to. Those in little towns will live unimpressive lives, those in large cities will have quite a colorful lives, and as for those in bustling towns...well, their lives will be full of excitement.”

Fenesi stared at Kusla, appearing to be stating that she never had such a thought before.

Kusla himself would forget this from time to time whenever he went wild in the towns.

However, whenever he thought of using his freedom to do something, he would reluctantly be reminded of this cruel reality.

“Because of this, it’s a miracle that we’re able to make it to Gulbetty in such a situation.”

It was common that the scattered bait would get to work and be dealt with later on.

Alchemists were ultimately affiliated to the Knights, never in an equal

position.

“But regarding this situation, there is a reason why we can’t give up no matter what.”

“Hm?”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis stared back innocently with her green eyes.

Both Kusla and Weyland appeared to have a reason where they could not say ‘guess we got no choice’ and give up.

The Azami’s Crest want this town. This information Weyland obtained indicated that this workshop would no longer be important to the Cladius Knights in the future, but on the other hand, it also indicated a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Azami’s Crest was a corps responsible for maintaining the security and reconstruction of the towns that were conquered. This reconstruction would not only involve the Knights themselves, as the merchants, farmers, and blacksmiths would also need to be gathered before a town could be rebuilt. In other words, once the Pagans were swept aside, the Azami’s Crest would head North along with the people necessary to rebuild the towns.

To summarize, that was the organization in charge of moving to the newly forayed lands.

Furthermore, their destination was Kazan, dubbed the largest mining town in the Pagans’ land. That place probably contained some unknown refining techniques being developed, and with new techniques and knowledge, there might be important clues for them to fulfill the things they could only dream of, and that certainly was not a hyperbole.

Who is the one sitting in front of me now? Thereafter, one would understand the question.

Till a while back, Kusla would have dismissed it was merely a myth, merely a superstition, but there was Fenesis.

In that case, the Pagan lands might contain something really unexpected.

Kusla and Weyland were confident of themselves as Alchemists, but even so, they did not accomplish anything for others to understand their abilities.

Accomplishments were a result of accumulated trust, and trust was gained through time. Ultimately, they could only accumulate their accomplishments through steady toil and time.

Unfortunately, the aspect called chance was never picky about choosing the opportune times. The once-in-a-lifetime chance one would encounter would occur at a moment one was never prepared for.

And even if Kazan did contain some unexpected knowledge and skills, once they were investigated and filtered, those dangerous techniques were likely to be sealed. If they were sealed deep into the Knights' treasures, they would never see the light of day again. It was likely only the initial batch of immigrants would be able to make contact with such skills before they were sealed.

Kusla stood up from his chair.

In such situations, any Alchemist would have such thoughts.

It was pointless for them to remain seated.

They had to do their very best.

Kusla shouted at Weyland,

“We got to try whatever we think of.”

Weyland immediately lifted his face, and got up from his chair.

“You do say some wise things from time to time~”

“Time to time?”

Weyland did not respond to Kusla's retort as he grabbed a picking of the crumbled and stuffed it into his mouth as he moved to the door. It appeared he was saying that he could not think of anything else, and even Kusla was slightly taken aback to see him descend the stairs so bluntly.

It appeared Fenesis too was taken aback by Weyland's decisiveness.

But even so, Kusla had no intention of dragging his feet around at this point, and he too wanted to hurry over to Weyland once he was done with his meal. Just when he was about to stuff the bread into his mouth, he thought of something.

"Ah, right, once you're done with your meal, come along too."

"Hm? Me?"

Why? She was really confused.

Though it was within his expectations, Kusla frowned, a bitter taste ostensibly spreading in his mouth.

That expression of his caused Fenesis to shiver, but Kusla paid no heed as he said.

"This is to be expected, you know? What do you think this is for? Do you think we are going to let you come along to the new town without a word? Are you a pet dog or cat or something?"

Kusla gave an anxiety-laden glare at Fenesis, and the latter seemed to understand that Kusla was implying something to her.

It concerned her future whereabouts, but she showed no intentions to be concerned by it.

It practically meant that she had long given up on it.

"I told you when we're doing Cupellation. You have to think for your own sake more, and your vision will expand as a result of that. You should be able to see a lot more, like what you don't like to do, what you don't want to go

along with, the benefits you will get for obeying even if you don't like it, and other things."

Fenesis looked skeptical upon hearing Kusla's words. Certainly this was the first time someone said this to her, that even if she was used to following an illogical fate, she should at least put up some resistance. However, this was the first time Kusla ever said this to anyone else.

"You have to reach your hand out. That is what babies do."

Kusla gave her a condescending stare, and she looked uneasy, apparently having lost her sense of direction as she whispered,

"...Y-yes..."

"Then finish up your food."

Kusla looked away and said this.

Fenesis was about to reply back, but after being tentatively for a moment she merely answered,

"...Yes."

"Hm."

Kusla stood up, and descend to the workplace downstairs.

While descending the stairs, he shot a side glance at Fenesis. Though she was eating frantically, the sight of it was so surreal.

He let out a sigh.

The road awaiting him was still long.

Kusla and Weyland first listed out what they could do, and then again affirmed the details, before they were left with no choice but to face reality.

"We just mentioned a bunch of potential plans, but I guess it's smelting

metals after all?”

“It gives the best payoff after all~”

Their conversation was in a deadlock by the time Fenesis was done cleaning up descended the stairs.

“So, how do we go about doing it?”

“Hmm? We go search the mines with the speculators...we’ll strike it big if we hit~”

The people looking for minerals would have to wander around in the hills all day, and start looking for things buried underground with the clues being the trees and the color of the dirt. They would be worried about being the lunch for the bears and the wolves, and harassed by the foxes and the birds. It was extremely likely that one would die because of an accident, or a slip, and It was said that only one out of a thousand would be able to find minerals to mine after a harrowing experience.

But if they do, they would strike big.

Kusla thought of the stories of those who found gold and silver mines, but all he could do was sigh.

Upon seeing Kusla and Weyland being like this, Fenesis was probably wondering how she should voice out. She did not approach the work table, merely sitting at the box placed in front of the cupboard.

Upon seeing Fenesis in such a state, Kusla let out a snicker. It was not necessarily at her, for there were crystals and ball-like gemstones placed in the cupboard behind her. Her dazzling emerald eyes glittered along with them, and she appeared to be an intricate doll.

“This is surreal.”

He mentioned this as he remained mesmerized by Fenesis’ appearance, but what they were going to discuss was not something to joke about.”

“Looks like we can only recreate the metal our predecessor Thomas made, I suppose?”

Upon hearing this, Weyland showed a rare grimace.

“We did our best, but we just can’t understand this.”

Weyland, more stubborn than rocks when it came to metallurgy, could only admit defeat.

One experiment was enough for him to understand the difference between him and Thomas.

Thomas’ metallurgy skills were superior to the point that he was able to be deployed to a bustling town in the frontlines. If he remained alive, he probably would be transferred to Kazan.

As expected, Kusla and Weyland were utterly furious at Post for murdering Thomas for his own personal gain, but Post was a man loyal to his own desires. As an Alchemist, Kusla did respect this aspect of Post, so he did have mixed feelings of the latter.

“Are we going to ransack this house? Maybe Post hid the metallurgy method somewhere.”

The assassinated Thomas Blanket created a metal of unbelievable purity in this workshop, and he recorded what appeared to be the plan on a parchment, but unfortunately, that was recorded in codes.

Kusla and Weyland managed to decrypt the critical parts, but the parchment was burned to ash by Post, who had Thomas murdered.

However, Alchemists typically left the results of their research somewhere in the workshop. Kusla and Weyland even went to the extent of checking the soot-covered ceiling and the back of the pillars, but to no avail.

Iron was an important metal that formed the backbone of human lives, and if they could increase its purity, they would be able to bring in a large income.

If they were able to bring about such an accomplishment, the higher ups of the Knights would probably value them more.

However—

“Shall we try our luck with alloys? I heard there’s bronze imported from the North.”

“If we can come up with a brand new metal like brass.”

“Before that matter, we still need to look into the uses of this potential new metal.”

“Ugh...”

As they had expected, it was not that simple for them to luck into the lottery. In any case, they were already meticulous in looking for everything. If there was something they could do to accomplish, they would have done it.

Kusla was unwilling to voice out this opinion, but he had to mention it,

“How about we go at it head on and voice our complaints?”

“...”

Weyland gave Kusla a look that practically implied the latter was looking for a death sentence.

And Kusla, taken for a fool, looked sullen, but they did not have the option of breaking through with their useless looks and disposition.

“I don’t think Autris will take us for anything, but if we can talk to the folks from the Azami’s Crest, we probably can fool him, right?”

“Hm!”

“Or do we follow along with our luggage?”

Kusla cupped his hands behind his head, looking at the ceiling as he said this.

And Weyland noted.

“Then what about little Ul?”

Kusla looked down, and just so happened to spot Fenesis. She was seated obediently in front of the gemstone cupboard like a finely-chiseled doll, and she inadvertently recoiled upon hearing their conversation suddenly directed at her.

“We can sleep on straw and clothes in the stables if we’re alone, and we can earn our keep working for blacksmiths. But we can’t do that with Ul around, you know?”

“Ack, I guess.”

Kusla stammered, and Weyland sighed.

“I don’t have any objection to this plan if you return Ul to the Choir, Kusla.”

“...!”

Fenesis gasped.

The Choir functioned similarly to the Church’s version in that they would sing hymns of praises, but in fact, they were a bunch of fanatics in the Knights that favored killing without remorse. Fenesis was deployed to this workshop as a pawn.

But Kusla took her in.

“With something to protect, you can’t go about as freely as you want, but this isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

Weyland offhandedly mentioned, and in contrast, Fenesis gave a look as though there was a dampener upon her. Deep within the darkness, she yearned a place of solace that would accept her.

Fenesis’ heart again looked a little uneasy.

She could not ignore Weyland’s words.

“I don’t intend to return this girl back to the Choir. And also, why mention

this out of a—”

Before Kusla was done with his words, Weyland suddenly looked away from him.

Kusla inadvertently followed his stare, and his eyes fell upon Fenesis, seated in front of the cupboard.

Her eyes were wide open, her face flushing, and anyone would have understood this reaction upon seeing it.

Kusla shot Weyland a look.

And Weyland in turn snickered as he looked back.

Finally, Kusla understood Weyland’s intentions.

“Well, in that case, I suppose we need to get an official permit from the Knights.”

Weyland grinned as he said this, and Kusla was dumbfounded as he sighed.

A childish prank, huh?

But Kusla had a notion, upon seeing Fenesis’ reaction, that if he let Fenesis to actually fall for him, her ‘lack of self-awareness’ would be dealt with.

In any case, no matter whether it was a person, object or location, the concept of ‘affection’ would cause one to have a strong sense of purpose. Despite this, all it would do was that the target of reliance would be changed to himself, and would not solve the root of the issue. Fenesis should change her own self more..

And so, she would be able to use her own hands to cling onto something.

“...Anyway, all we can do is to move forward steadily.”

“Hm?”

Kusla paid no heed to Weyland’s teasing, and this caused the latter to be mildly surprised.

He took a deep sigh, and continued,

“When we leave for the town Kazan, we got to get the techniques they need. Let’s start searching.”

Weyland gave a meaningful glance at Kusla, and impatiently noted,

“It’s most likely just iron~”

He noted in an unmotivated manner, but if he really was not interested, he would not have bothered with a reply.

“Now then, what do we do?”

Weyland asked, and Kusla answered with the will of an Alchemist,

“Let’s start asking about the things we do not know about.”

Neither the king, the nobles, or the Cladius knights, people with power, would gallantly and irrationally go out of their way to shelter Alchemists. They do have issues they had to settle, and Alchemists too had issues to settle. Both sides would forever be in a benefit relationship, and nothing more.

Thus, for Alchemists to let the rulers value them, they would have to abide by the ruler’s wishes and act accordingly. If Kusla and Weyland wish to get into the team moving to Kazan, they would have to prove their value for moving them.

Fortunately, though they had to fawn around with the Knights, they could use the positions the Knights for in. If they were to say ‘sorry, this is the wishes of our lord’, it would be likely that they could be allowed to do whatever they wanted.

There were many insolent folks amongst the Alchemists, and in fact, most people had such a personality, but in this case, the authority they could seize upon was out of the ordinary.

“Ah, y-yes, these are the goods imported from the North.”

A middle-aged man spoke as he wiped his sweat profusely. He was not obese in any sense, but the flesh on his face was intriguingly loose. He was a member of a middle-sized firm based in Gulbetta, and Kusla had him visit the firm's warehouse.

Kusla might assume that he was used to seeing a warehouse filled with goods, but even he was taken aback after seeing the items the firm had. It was messier than an Alchemist's workshop, and to summarize, there was no sense of cohesiveness. Right beside the massive pile of onions were skins stacked high up, and the clothing waiting for further refurbishing were piled upon the wine barrels. A little twitch of the nose would allow one to smell the spices, and the animal and sulfur stench mixed within them.

However, the man leading him did not appear to lose his way despite this erratic warehouse. Kusla had an assumption that the merchants probably had their own way of sorting items.

This time, Kusla wanted the firm to show him some ores and metals deported from the North, but every action he did would cause the man to gulp.

It was not usually, commonplace actually, for an Alchemist to look around at copper and silver ores, tin ingots and crude iron, for Alchemists had to personally see and touch the materials before they make their purchases.

But this was a little different. There was a little lackey following Kusla this time. Whenever he touched a mineral, the lackey would flip through a thick book.

That lackey, holding an elegantly patched book made of deer leather, was of course, Fenesis, in her usual nun garb.

The merchant looked at tentatively, his fear for her more pronounced than it was at Kusla.

The Heretical Inquisition had this Alchemist lead her, ready to kill at any

given moment.

That was probably what he had assumed.

But it was fine to let this misunderstanding linger, for it would be more convenient to do things.

Kusla was going about in a half-threatening manner, not to check on any trade secrets, but to inspect the items in the warehouse. One of the items in a wooden crate surprised him somewhat.

“Stibnite?”

The one thing Autris refused to delegate this morning was this Stibnite.

“Hm? Ah, yes, that is...”

The merchant appeared to be swallowing his stiff tongue as he gulped, and continued,

“Th-this is to be used as an additive for pig feed, and th-that...”

Upon saying that, his eyes quickly fell upon Fenesis.

Fenesis began to search the heavy book she tugged under her armpit, searched through the contents, and once she found what she wanted, she compared it to the actual item.

The serious look she gave due to her passion for studying certainly increased the impression that she was a member of the Inquisition.

And while she flipped through the book, the man’s face went from pale to sulfur.

While the mining and refining for stibnite might be foreign to clergymen, it was infamous enough to be dubbed the ‘clergy killer’, for it could be used as a poison. Stibnite was typically used as an additive for animal feed, and any clergyman eating it when feeling unwell will depart for Heaven, so the legend state.

There probably was a basis for it.

For in medicine, Stibnite could be used as an enemic.

“Where are these from?”

“Ah, yes. This...came through...Beoldo...it-it came from Kazan...”

The man flipped through a notebook, and glanced up to take a peek.

Kusla snorted, folded his arms in front of his chest, and stroked his chin.

So Kazan did contain some Stibnite after all,

“Is it fine to show me the swords and weapons? Anything imported from the Pagan’s lands?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, of course.”

Once he was done, the man led Kusla and Fenesis deeper into the warehouse.

Kusla followed the man, and Fenesis followed Kusla. She was dressed in a long, white habit, and though she had a nice rest, the fatigue derived from the cupellation work did not vanish completely.

Furthermore, she was embracing a heavy book, looking unreliable as she appeared prone to stumble at any given moment.

She was akin to a toy swaying around in front of a cat; Kusla had such a thought as he looked at the girl, and he really had the urge to reach out to support her as he watched that delicate body tumble and sway to and fro.

“Over here...erm, the Knights and the Church both gave the permit, so...”

The man was trying to explain the issue of importing items from the Pagan lands during the war, but Kusla practically ignored it. He knew that no matter whether there was war or not, merchants would do anything to profit. This was similar in concept to the Magdala the Alchemists had.

Thus, Kusla brushed his explanation aside, and drew a sword, swinging. The blade gave a blue tinge, showing the limberness.

“Nice iron.”

“I-I was shocked too...”

“The problem is, how is such a fine iron forged?”

Kusla sheathed the sword, and even the sound of sheathing was mesmerizing.
The craftsman had fine skills.



“Is it the quality of the minerals, or the additives?”

“Additives?”

The merchant instinctively asked.

He probably assumed that it was something related, for he instinctively expressed his skepticism.

“Stibnite has other uses besides killing clergymen and being pig feed.”

Once he said those words, Kusla immediately noted Fenesis standing beside him, looking a little tense. He had no intention of teasing her, but his intuitive verbal etiquette had a little smut to it.

“Refined Stibnite can be fused easily with metals, basically all of them, like gold, silver, copper and tin. If the alloy has the right blend to it, it can lower the malleability and increase the hardness of it. I guess it’s likely that once the Stibnite is extracted, the craftsmen of Kazan would add a certain amount.

“Haa...th-that’s right...”

The merchant took the initiative to speak up, a rarity at that,

“It’s possible that any changes in the properties of metal may affect the transport of the other minerals.”

This man appeared to be smart.

Kusla gave a snicker, and returned the sword,

“The crafting methods may be kept a secret, but it’s impossible for them to withhold the purchase records. If you have a closer look at the records, you can get an idea of which workshops, and what additives are used to forge the metals. Looking at the quality of a metal from a certain town, you can have a rough guess on the material flowing into and out of the town. If you cut off the Stibnite flow, it’ll definitely affect the quality of the metal.”

The merchant nodded, appearing to be an apprentice learning his job.

“But blacksmiths will do whatever they can to conceal this matter, so I suppose we are lucky to be able to realize this.”

Upon saying this, Kusla patted the shoulder of the impressed man.

This was the moment when the man was probably reminded that Kusla was an alchemist.

“And so, luck is something that should be shared with others. That is what you were thinking too, right?”

Kusla stared at the merchant’s face as his hand remained on the shoulder. The merchant’s lips contorted nervously, and he said,

“O-of course...”

Kusla was satisfied with that meek smile, and removed his hand.

“Now then, you do know what I am thinking now, right?”

Upon seeing the smirk on Kusla’s face, the man tried his best to show a smile, but failed.

And he remained still, appearing to be attempting to say something.

Kusla pondered in his intrigue, ‘ahh’ and blurted out.

“I don’t have any interest in how much you are earning here. If I do, I have better places to look.”

He was informing the merchant that he was not here to inspect on their taxes.

Of course, it would depend on whether the other party actually did believe him. The merchant man seemed to be convinced that his accounting books were in danger, rather than to believe Kusla’s words, and his suspicions were causing Kusla to feel peeved about it.

In any case, he slowly nodded, “Please wait for a little while” and made a turn to the right.

Kusla, who was left behind, let out a condescending sneeze when faced with

the dustiness of the goods crammed inside this place. He stuck his fingers into a wooden box with straw sticking out from it, and pried it open. There was a golden apple as large as the palm of a hand. Once this thing was heated by hot water until the stem was hot enough, it could be placed on the table and used to warm the hand when the user was writing. Kusla held it in one hand, and marveled at the craftwork as he muttered, only to hear a little gulp from behind. Right behind him was none other than Fenesis, staring at him intently.

“It’s not a pure metal. It’s a plating.”

“...?”

“Plating...ah, I haven’t taught you what are they...”

Kusla gave with an impatient look, and Fenesis, who was holding a massive book with both hands, rattled off.

“I’ll do an experiment after I’m done reading.”

I don’t know what it was, but I’ll quickly show you.

It was basically her saying that she was hardworking, that she would be reliable.

“Hah.”

However, Kusla snorted it off, and Fenesis appeared dejected.

Kusla had a look around the warehouse, only to finally land his eyes on Fenesis, and tapped the the utterly intimidated latter on the nose, causing her to shake her hand.

“Wah!? O-ow!!”

“What did I say? Don’t react like a dog facing his reflection in the mirror.”

Fenesis then swung Kusla’s arm back hard, and held down her nose as she stared back.

“There are many different types of platings, like for example, a common plating used for gold is hydrargyrum. Hydrargyrum is cheap, but never once was it able to provide a satisfactory result.”

“...”

“Also, such things typically won’t be recorded in the books. A fool is one who thinks he knows everything just by reading books, and giving off an instinctive, primal reaction after being teased is all the more foolish.”

“...”

Fenesis gave a teary look as she pinched her nose, but it probably was not because her nose was hurting.

“Enough with that pouty look, show me that cute side of yours.”

Kusla noted monotonously, devoid of any emotion, and naturally, Fenesis realized that she was teased.

However, it was ridiculous of her to cry just from being teased.

Having realized this, Fenesis felt dejected, and turned her face aside.

Kusla sighed, but not because Fenesis’ thoughts could be read easily.

But because Kusla knew that she would be as anxious as the fish wading in shallow waters when she interacted with others.

“Were you concerned by Weyland’s words?”

Upon hearing this, Fenesis immediately shrank.

This young girl had a cursed bloodline flowing in her, seeking solace on this world.

Perhaps what Weyland said was merely a joke, but what did she feel to be told that she was the reason they had to move. At the very least, she probably was hoping to be a little useful.

In fact, she was enthusiastic when she first arrived at this trading place. As

for why the merchants were tentatively wary of her as a heretical inquisition, it would be because she was too serious.

Kusla averted his eyes, and let out a soft sigh, only to stare at Fenesis again, saying,

“I kept you so that you’ll remain with me, and that’s the biggest premise to all this. Do you understand?”

“...But...”

“Or are you saying that you need proof to be put at ease?”

“Eh...!?”

Before Fenesis could recover, her petite was embraced in Kusla’s clutches.

His arms were wrapped firmly around her slender waist, ostensibly about to snap it. He stared at her eyes, looking as though he was though he was going to swallow her head first.

“Hm?”

Fenesis blurted, and at this moment, finally understood what Kusla was doing to her.

She looked like a child about to burst into tears, her lips twitching away. She then pressed the book at Kusla’s face, pushing him away with all her might.

She’s not hitting me? Kusla had a sudden thought, and was delighted with it. At the same time, he simply let go of her.

“Y-you...you’re really the worst of the worst!”

She was perplexed, troubled, and one had to wonder whether she was blushing out of embarrassment, or something else.

Fenesis, blushing away, was doing her best to tidy her appearance, and in that instance, Kusla had a peek at her expectant look when he embraced her. There was no way he mistook that face.

The girl could not live on by herself, and unknowingly, she lost her sense of self, and had a maniacal desire for something that could prove that she lived. Such a desire formed an impulse that far surpassed logic and rationality, an impulse of wanting to devote her utmost to a certain person, an impulse that resided in her heart.

But in a certain sense, this was akin to desiring salvation through death.

Thus, Kusla was delighted that Fenesis was willing to defy him.

Though her instincts for self-preservation were weak, it was still there.

Kusla had a feeling that this Fenesis alone was a worthy cause for him to forge a sword of Orichalcum.

“I got it. I got it. Don’t be angry now.”

“~~...”

“But you have to remember something.”

“Wh-what is it?”

Kusla saw through Fenesis’ thinking, that she wanted to ignore him and give in to her rage, but if she could have done that, Kusla would not be having such a hard time.

He gave a sarcastic jab, saying,

“I’m an alchemist. There is no way I can turn the worst form of lead into the best form of gold, you know?”

Fenesis was dumbfounded, and then, she immediately retorted,

“Th-the idea of turning lead into gold is wrong to begin with.”

“Oh?”

“T-to be exact, there is gold inside lead already.”

I won’t be fooled by your words.

Again, she showed a reaction of a child who was having a squabble, but perhaps she never did have a squabble before, for she probably had no friends to begin with. Having thought of this, Kusla had a notion that if such experiences were to continue to pile up, Fenesis might have a sense of self.

“But in that case, am I really the worst of the worst?”

As before, Kusla’s tone had a clear indication of ‘I’m going to tease you, right here, right now’. Of course, he never did show such a thought on his face.

“...Hm?”

“Because it does contain gold, does it not?”

Hm?”

“Lead is the lowest of all the metals, but if it contained gold, is it still it? Or do we say that it has the most value?”

Fenesis’ mouth was half-opened, and she was unable to say a word.

But once she saw Kusla beaming away, she had a notion that she had to close her mouth first no matter what happened.

Typically, the moments when she remained prickly was when she realized she was being teased.

The shape of an object is typically only amplified when under pressure..

And thus, when Fenesis abruptly realized something, she would show a gleeful face which one could not help but pinch with both hands.

“B-but, if the gold is extracted out of the lead, there is no gold left, and that is the kind of lead you are.”

Kusla had assumed that he cornered her, but she shot back with a roar. Fenesis was finally able to protect herself well.

That calm, gleeful expression on her expression really looked interesting.

Kusla shrugged, and looked at the warehouse entrance. The merchant entered, rigorously shaking the accounts in his hands. Fenesis zealously scanned her habit, wondering if it was ruffled because of Kusla's teasing, and the latter patted her on the back.

"That's it. Keep it up."

Kusla muttered, and Fenesis stopped what she was doing to look up at him blankly.

"Hm?"

Once he asked, Fenesis frantically looked away, hiding her own panic.

The man was intrigued by Fenesis' appearance, but once Kusla spoke to him, he spent all his efforts talking, and had no time to be surprised.

However, Kusla realized at that moment.

Fenesis was looking as though something was about to overflow from within her heart, like a water vessel that was burst. She pulled her habit down, desperately hiding the face deep within it.

The moment he left the merchant firm, every [person, from the accountant to the boss himself came to send him off.

While it was not necessarily a bribe, Kusla did not confiscated the imports they took in. It was not because he was afraid of retribution, but that he felt it was better to avoid getting involved with the vehement lure of the merchants. Like Alchemists, those people would try to guess the intent of the opposition, build relationships, and profit from it. They were not like Fenesis, but if humans were to have deeper bonds with others, their actions would be increasingly restricted. It was a matter of fact.

Thus, Kusla went to a place where the firm could not be seen, and finally was able to sweep the warehouse dust off his clothes.

“Didn’t get the clues I want.”

He pulled at the hem of his pants, straightened himself, and lifted his head to stare at the clear sky in the middle of winter.

”Creak”, the bones on his neck made such a sound, and this caused Fenesis, who finally managed to calm down, to be taken aback.

“W-what do we do now?”

“Hm?”

He never expected Fenesis to take the initiative to ask this question.

But he immediately realized that she was trying her best to act studious.

And though he did not comment on this, Kusla did not want to nip this new bud, and carefully chose his words as he spoke,

“If we can’t get anything out of a firm that big, I guess we’ll have the same results wandering around at other places.”

“Th-then...”

It was surreal to actually see her try so hard to speak.

But one could assume that it was impossible for her to say anything, so Kusla continued on before Fenesis could feel dejected.

“We’ll head to the Craftsmen Guild. The blacksmiths working in the town probably have an idea of where more of the materials are going, and they probably know something about metallurgy.”

“I-I see.”

“But don’t put too much hope into this.”

After hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis looked stupefied.

For Kusla said those words with a look of disgust.

“Like...that?”

“Sort of.”

“Huh...?”

Fenesis appeared as though she either understood it, or did not. However, surely she did not understand.

Kusla had this thought, and continued abruptly,

“You do remember that I said that a craftsman’s workshop is a very dangerous place, right?”

With the large book in her hands, Fenesis asked with a serious look on her face, seemingly wanting to crush the anxiety in her heart.

“Wh-what do I do now?”

”Don’t believe in others that easily. Or else you will be tricked into saying some lewd words again.”

Kusla could have answered this, but at this point, Fenesis’s decision was that it would be most sensible to follow Kusla’s instructions.

He nodded, and answered seriously.

“Remain quiet and listen to our conversation. Don’t talk, and that’s all.”

Kusla obviously curled his lips at the very end, giving a mischievous smirk, and Fenesis, paying attention to him as she listened intently, immediately puffed her cheeks.

Shockingly however, once she let the air all, she immediately lowered her shoulders dejectedly, saying,

“...I understand. At the very least...I don’t want to get in your way.”

Perhaps she had a little vision of her own position at this point.

Once she saw Kusla nod silently, Fenesis appeared to be a little delighted.

And so Kusla led Fenesis down the bustling street of Gulbetty.

Soon after, they arrived at the next destination.

The Craftsmen Guild was located near the headquarters of the Cladius Knights' Baggage Corps headquarters, and there was a golden hammer signboard adorned upon the splendid doors.

"Now then."

Kusla patted off the dust he got from walking through the crowd. Right when he was about to enter, he noticed something,

Fenesis was not behind him.

Kusla turned behind to look, and found Fenesis putting a hand up at the wall of a large merchant firm, stumbling forward. She was holding the extremely heavy alchemist guide book with the other.

"..."

She was wheezing away, but once she saw Kusla waiting for him, she immediately strutted towards him.

She held onto the book with both hands, and appeared to be on the verge of falling over. In fact, she had to reposition herself several times as the book was slipping out of her clutches.

Kusla quietly took back what he was thinking about her before this.

"Give me that."

He then tried to snatch the book, but his movements were restrained, for Fenesis was resisting as though her precious doll was about to be snatched away.

But at the moment she was about to snatch the book back, Kusla reached a finger out from his left hand, and poked at her nose.

"Don't do too much for nothing. When you have to look for help, ask."

Fenesis stared at Kusla's finger as though it was a fly, and then slowly diverted her eyes to his face. She looked a little awkward, and appeared to be burying her face under her veil immediately.

However, she did not show cowardice. The thoughts Kusla wished to convey might be engraved inside her mind, little by little.

“Goodness.”

Kusla said that, and just when he was about to sigh.

“I said that I don't know!”

A shrill voice can be heard from behind the doors.

“And besides, what do you plan to do after knowing that? Huh?”

The growl sounded as though it was of a young lady. Kusla recalled the young widow called Irine who managed the guild.

Fenesis remained behind Kusla, fidgeting uncomfortably, but once Kusla turned around to give her a skeptical look, it appeared that she was slightly relieved.

“You actually believed the rumors!? Are you trying to slander the honor of the Guild?”

The furious growls were such that there was no need to eavesdrop. Luckily, the wooden doors of the Guild remained shut; there were passers-by on the street, and nobody actually paid any attention to this place.

And then, Kusla vaguely heard some vague exchanges, followed by a violent roll of footsteps. He understood very well that the door was about to be opened soon, and he gently strafed to the door of the door.

Soon after, the doors opened, “As the Good Book says, when there is smoke, there is fire”, and Kusla could hear one of the people utter these words.

The trio of middle-aged men looked utterly incensed as they exited, and it

appeared they were in differing positions.

One of them noticed Kusla, and hurriedly turned around to stop another one from cussing out.

Kusla gave them a deliberate, sly smile, appearing to be saying ‘I heard nothing’.

The trio were probably blacksmiths, and they appeared gaudy as they entered the crowd.

Their backs could be seen as a little dejected.

“...Oh?”

A Guild would be a rigid organization that bands people with similar occupations together and tie them up so that they could all share their spoils. It was to be expected that there would be conflicts and friction amongst the members.

However, it was truly unusual for there to be hollering in a Guild house in the middle of the day, and even the word ‘honor’ popped up somewhere. For blacksmiths, the word ‘honor’ was akin to the Magdala alchemists had.

Kusla stared at where the blacksmiths vanished to, shrugged, and entered the Guild.

“What else is there to talk—”

The moment he entered, he could hear an utterly vengeful line, but before she could let loose her emotions, she quietly let it simmer.

“Pardon me.”

“...”

This red-haired lady who shut her mouth was the leader of the Gulbetty craftsmen guild, ‘Irine’. As before, she was dressed in plain unappealing clothing like a factotum. She was not an outstanding beauty, but given her

honest personality, she was a lady who was rather popular amongst the men.

Irine was blushing due to surprise and awkwardness, and she went to the front of the cupboard, appearing to be attempting an escape as she began to rummage through it.

“Wh-what do you need here, o Alchemist?”

She said as she kept her back turned on Kusla. Typically, she would have been considered too young to be the Guild Leader, but this action alone emphasized her immaturity. However, Kusla chose not to respond, not for this reason.

The floor was scrubbed cleanly, the chairs were turned and placed on the tables, and the candlestands on the wall had some new candles on them.

Kusla then pointed his chin at Fenesis behind him, prompting her to close the door.

Fenesis cautiously closed the door, and with a thud, isolated this place from the noise outside.

This was when Kusla proceeded into his ‘alchemist mode’.

“It appears that I have caused an inconvenience while you were busy?”

“Huh!”

Irine snorted instinctively, and replied,

“So, o Alchemist, are you learning to be a spy?”

She then turned around, her face brimming with a contorted, forsaken smile. Once she saw Fenesis diagonally behind Kusla, her eyes immediately widened.

“She’s not of the heretical inquisition. You may relax.”

Irine gave Kusla a little surprised look, “No, erm, well,” and she gave a little cough, giving a gaudy look as she scratched the back of her ears. Perhaps she

realized how uncouth she was in the face of the nun Fenesis with such a perfect appearance.

“...May I know what you want?”

She deliberately spoke with a formal tone, practically venting as she asked/
But Kusla did not intend to act as he did during his first greeting here.

Looking at the previous interaction, it appeared that would have caused an opposite effect.

“I do want to ask something about metallurgy.”

“...”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Irine gave an obvious frown.

“Are you two going too?”

She muttered.

Kusla in turn asked back, and this was not an act.

“Too?”

“U.”

Irine noticed that she was overthinking this, and hurriedly corrected herself,

“I-It’s nothing. Now then, what do you need?”

It might be good to press the issue and coerce her to confess. Perhaps that should work.

However, with Fenesis beside him on this day, he should present himself with a little dignity.

“I want to ask about metals. The metals coming in from the North... especially the materials related to Kazan.”

“...?”

Irine's lowered her eyebrows in resignation as she stared at Kusla.

It appeared that what Kusla said was a little surprising to her.

Did she not hear all sorts of rumors with regards to Kazan?

"Why is this...well, someone like me probably never dreamt of it."

Irine let out a sigh, appearing to be indicating that she could not understand him. Irine relaxed her shoulders, 'Please have a seat' and made such a gesture as she invited them to sit. She did not show any fear to an Alchemist, either because she was overly bold, or that she was broken inside; perhaps it was a mix of both, Kusla deduced. She was shoved into this position as a puppet, and if she was not in such a turbulent situation, she probably would be a nice, plain town girl with a cheerful personality.

"Now then? What do you want to know exactly? Our Guild alone has no less than 50 different occupations, and we have about one, two hundred kinds of items we create. What do you wish to investigate on? The original materials? The process? Half-finished items?"

Kusla pulled the chair from the table, and casually sat upon it.

"The original materials, and the half-finished items that are to be completed."

Saying that, he found that Fenesis was struggling with a chair she could not take down, so he helped her out.

"...And the material to be made into?"

"Anything goes."

"Huh? I told you before already that we have dozens of metal types alone that come to us. No matter what you say now—"

"I want those that can be improved on."

Irine went quiet, probably trying to calm herself down. After taking a deep breath, she said,

“We do report to the Knights with regards to such matters, but your predecessor Mr Thomas did solve a lot of issues for us before, you know?”

She added an annoying line at the end, but Kusla could only give a wry smile.

For in this situation, he had nothing to refute with.

“I don’t need it to be metal alone, but is there something that can bring about huge benefit to the Knights once the issue is resolved?”

Kusla spread his arms wide as he said that, and this gesture was to emphasize that he was not hiding anything in his words.

Irine folded her arms in front of her chest, giving Kusla a skeptical look.

“In other words, you want to achieve an accomplishment?”

“You can summarize it as that, yes.”

After hearing Kusla’s confirmation, Irine scratched her head, looking a little befuddled.

“What a strange man you are, coming to the Guild because of such a matter.”

In any town, the Guilds and the Alchemists tread a complicated relationship. This goes double for the Guilds that borrowed money from the Knights, and the Alchemists who were hired by the Knights.

They were neither enemies, nor they were friends.

The Guilds would borrow money from the Knights, hoping to be closer to the authority of the Knights, and establish an advantageous position against the other competing firms in the town. In theory, this was the correct thinking, but in any case, debt would always occur.

And the alchemists had the lender—the Knights, as their employer, making them idle sons. Their father was not too aloof towards them, but no matter how the sons worked hard, they could never get their father to love them.

Thus, Alchemists did all they could to maximize such a relationship.

For if they were belittled, their research would be highly hindered.

Typically, Kusla would act according to this logic, but he was a little different on this day.

“I have a bet on my life, and because of this, I should be respecting those with knowledge and experience here.”

Kusla folded his legs, and then put his hands on his knees, dispirited as he talked.

Irine was startled as she continued to stare at Kusla, and then, she heaved a sigh of relief, showing a sarcastic smile on her lips,

“Someone once told me to be careful of an alchemist’s words.”

“Nice advice. It means that you have to put serious thought into it.”

Upon hearing those words, Irine pouted her lips unhappily,

“Now then, do you have any idea? As you may have guessed, we do want to have some nice accomplishments no matter what so that the Knights will value us more.”

No matter how unbelievable it might be, any honest person who was begged so earnestly would inadvertently believe.

Irine gave a perturbed look. She knew very well that she had such a personality.

“Erm...but, but well, it is as what I said before. We have reported to the Knights whatever we wish to modify, and Mr Thomas basically improved a lot of things for us.”

“...I do feel awkward when you mention that name.”

Irine was a little taken aback, and then gave a teasing smile.

She probably was the approachable kind of person.

She was also a girl who was easily unnerved, but unlike Fenesis, it was of a different kind.

“Because that is an amazing alchemist.”

“Can’t refute that. He’s so amazing it’s infuriating.”

“Hohoho.”

It was the first time Irine showed such a heartfelt smile, as though she was the one being praised.

It was likely that those working in the metalworks area felt that Thomas was exceptional.

“It would be wonderful if he was a craftsman and not an Alchemist.”

Irine stared afar as she muttered.

Kusla felt that her words had some spiteful, mocking intent to it, it was also her heartfelt words,

“If such an amazing man was a craftsman, he probably wouldn’t have died; what you said does make sense in some way.”

“...”

Irine glanced aside at Kusla, her lips relaxing.

Her hostility faded a little.

“But that is impossible. That man cannot join us.”

“Mind telling me the reason?”

Irine, a widow who inherited a Craftsman Guild in a bustling town, shrugged and said with an anguished smile,

“Someone chasing a dream will never become an outstanding craftsman.”

Those were the words of one who understood how the order of the world was like.

Kusla smiled, and twisted his head a little.

“Now I do understand why you remain in such a place.”

“You may praise me, but I won’t tell you anything.”

Kusla could not help but frown.

She felt delighted that she was praised by someone for something she wanted to be praised, but at the same time, she felt careless due to this praise, and felt wary. This was causing her a dilemma.

Now this isn’t a bad lady, Kusla thought.

“Well, Kazan, is it? It is currently in battle, so the items aren’t being transported here directly. However, there are many other materials that come in from other towns. After hearing what you said, I feel that request books and our records with Mr Thomas would be much clearer than those purchase specifics.”

“You can show me without asking for the blacksmiths’ permission?”

Irine showed a disgusted smile as she answered,

“Will they make a wise decision? If you want to, you can see it no matter how much you are obstructed.”

“Authority is something that can only be used at the crucial moments.”

“I don’t want to hear you make a joke here.”

“I do not intend to joke about here.”

Kusla stared right at Irine’s eyes as he said this, but the latter merely replied with a tragic smile.



“I suppose.”

That was an expression of one who clearly understood that she had no right.

Irine shrugged, put her hands on her hips, and sighed,

“Where is that thing—are you going to wait here...or do I deliver it to the workshop later?”

“I will feel sorry if you are being so diligent.

Kusla said jokingly. Irine then narrowed an eye, giving a smile.

“I do not wish to go to an Alchemist’s place.”

“Then I shall be waiting here.”

Irine smiled wordlessly, and after waving her hand airily, she entered the inside of the house.

Kusla waited for the casually tied red hair to vanish, and let himself reminiscence the refreshing conversation they just had. He did not know why she had a dispute with the blacksmiths, but that rapid-fire lashing was really impressive.

“Nice lady, huh?”

Kusla commented as he stroked his chin, while Fenesi behind him began to feel jumpy.

He glanced past the shoulder to give her a look, and found her staring at Kusla worriedly.

“I’m not talking about that behavior of hers.”

Fenesis felt relieved at Kusla’s words, and exhaled.

Even if Fenesis could develop a personality of her own, and exhibit some behavior, Kusla did not feel that she would become like Irine. Irine and Fenesis were different in nature.

Even though they were gold, they differed in that one was Pyrite, while the other was Brass.

“Found it.”

Irine brought in a pile of documents as she entered.

Though she had a slender figure, she was the wife of a craftsman after all, and it appeared that she was rather strong.

Kusla widened his eyes slightly, and Irine dumped the documents onto the table with a thud, put her hand on it, and asked in a displeased manner.

“So, o skinny Alchemist, are you able to bring it back?”

“Unfortunately for me, my lackey’s one weak fellow. I’ll just bring some obviously useful ones back.”

“Hmph!”

Irine snorted, and Fenesis was taken aback by her as she cringed back. Perhaps she was looking over there.

Kusla stood up, and browsed through the dusty documents on the table.

“The oldest records was 4 years ago?”

“I suppose? Before that time, the Church was stronger, and the Knights didn’t have that much of a prestige. If we’re talking about back then, the details of most of the materials bought should be in the warehouse of the Bukulgs Firm.”

“Bukulgs Firm?”

“The original owner of the building where the Knights are at now. Before the Knights came they were the ones who financed us. It was said that this firm was the one that brought blacksmiths to this town.”

Kusla shrugged.

One could say that instead of being heartless, the Knights were suckers for

efficiency.

To win the war, weapons and tools were a necessity, and thus, the Knights had to quickly gain full control of the Craftsmen Guild. The easiest way to do that would be to control the place that already controlled the Guild.

“Those that have nothing are the happiest, for those that have something will have them taken away.”

“Such an annoying saying.”

Irine sat on the chair, her body and the chair leaning to the side as she put an elbow on the table, her hand on her chin.

“But has it been 4 years...?”

Irine sighed. The chair she was seated at had an unusually tall backrest, and it was a customary ornament to be used for certain occasions, when the one sitting on it would be the biggest in command.

That uneasy look as she fidgeted about was akin to someone pouting/

“4 years ago? Were you still a brat sucking on your mom’s breasts?”

Kusla proceeded to tease her, but of course, Irine did not show anger.

“Nothing has changed thus far.”

“For whom?”

Kusla said, and Irine gave an annoyed look.

“Is it true that Alchemists can use magic?”

“You should know the answer yourself.”

“...”

Irine frowned hard, and curled her lips.

“I never thought that the person who should be seated here died so soon. It is true that he was well advanced in his years...”

“I do wish to meet him too.”

“...”

In the face of such a glare, Kusla remained nonchalant.

“Words can showcase a person’s personality. The letters signed off with Brunner are all...your husband’s, no?”

“Yes.”

Kusla did not know whether Irine really loved her husband, but certainly she was in love with his skills.

The aura of a metalworker.

Good grief, Kusla lamented.

“I suppose it is a craftsman’s happiness to have someone fall in love with his skills.”

In response to Kusla’s words, Irine merely shrugged.

“If I were a man, all these would be just mere fluff.”

“Are you saying you were eyeing for fortune and authority?”

“...What an annoying man you are.”

“Saying the truth makes me an annoyance.”

Irine snorted, and with her arm holding up her face, she feebly noted,

“I really found myself drawn to the metal...”

Upon seeing her like this, Kusla sensed that she was suffering every day.

Everyone had their own roles they should abide by. For example, man hammered metal, and women picked the flowers.

If they were deviated from their roles, it would be tough for them, arduous even. Fenesis would be an extreme, classic example.

“You don’t seem to have anything to talk about with your friends of the same age.”

“Yes. I do talk to them about my toiling tales of pouring coal into the furnace and making bricks, but nobody wants to.”

“Do you intend to talk to me about this?”

“Do you think there’ll be a nice, enjoyable conversation?”

The sarcastic smile she revealed was truly mesmerizing.

And in the face of such a callous remark, Kusla could only shrug, and say,

“You’re the leader of the Craftsmen, and I’m an alchemist.”

“Yes. We have to define our roles.”

Kusla snorted, and finally sifted out a third of the documents.

“I’ll be borrowing these first.”

“You don’t have to return me those documents. I don’t want to see you again.”

She remained faced to the side, giving a serious look as she said.

Kusla did not know whether she was joking, but because of that, he had a favorable impression on her.

“Well, I’ll get someone to send it back then.”

“Hmph!”

Kusla wanted to bid farewell, but Irine did not look back at him as she merely waved a hand, and quickly cleared up the remaining documents on the table.

Kusla then gave Fenesis, still seated on the chair, a glance.

Once she understood his intent, she immediately stood up. The thick book was held by Kusla, and in turn, the documents were left for Fenesis. She received them with some skepticism, but rather than being worried about

Kusla, it appeared she was perturbed by the conversation Kusla and Irine had. Perhaps it was due to the circumstances of the leader, but they felt gloomy within the Craftsmen Guild; they exited it, and the bright sunlight was pleasant.

No matter what Irine thought, the town remained bustling.

Kusla took a deep breath, and right when he was about to leave, he noticed Fenesis standing at the Guild entrance, not moving at all.

“What’s the matter?”

“Huh?”

Kusla asked, and Fenesis seemed to have made up her mind as she said,

“Er-erm, that person seems to be having some troubles.”

She was dressed in a pure, white habit, and even her heart was that of a nun.

Her actual vocation was no longer a nun, but the Knights initially sent her to a monastery so that they could monitor her. That was when she subconsciously devoted herself to God’s teachings so that she could have a steady form of reliance, to purge the uneasiness in her heart. Abiding by God’s law would allow her some easy form of directive.

But even so, God’s teachings itself suited her very well.

Her personality was undoubtedly one that cared for others.

“Well, she’s living a life she’s not completely willing to go with, and in a certain sense, it may be frustrating for her.

“...Please don’t try to pass this off as nothing.”

“It’ll take a long time for me to fully explain this.”

“I’m willing to listen.”

Is this some little wisecrack? Kusla wondered, but he immediately realized

that he too did use such an expression before. The influence he had on her certain gave him an inexplicable feeling that itched his heart.

He raised his chin, “Don’t pay too much attention to this, let’s go”, and seemed to be saying that before he continued forth.

Fenesis appeared to be curious about what happened behind the door, but she gave up, and quickly followed after Kusla.

“Please explain to me—”

“That man thing.”

Kusla said impatiently, and Fenesis immediately blushed, shutting up.

Her face still tense, she continued on, and after pacing with Kusla for 4-5 steps, she stared at Kusla, saying,

“She looks to be in pain.”

Kusla gave a glance aside at Fenesis, and then evaded a herd of pigs that were chased forward as they passed him by.

However, Fenesis was unable to dodge it, and was instantly swept to the back like a kitten in the river, and finally managed to evade them at a firm’s dock. Then she ran back to Kusla, ostensibly escaping the laughters of the workers.

“Before worrying about others, how about you worry about yourself first?”

Fenesis probably wanted to hide the awkwardness of her failure from before, but she should have realized what Kusla was getting at. She lowered her head with a frown, but that look of anger did not last for long.

“But you saved me.”

Once he saw Fenesis as the latter said those words, the faint smile vanished from his face.

For he understood Fenesis’ personality well. There was no way she would be discreet about this.

“Then—”

“Other people too...is that what you are getting at?”

Kusla said as he pulled the veil over her head.

For several seconds, Fenesis did not understand what Kusla did to her, but it was until her ears were slightly exposed that she realized, and in a panic, held it down.

“Wh-what are you...”

“I told you so many times, and you still don’t understand? Don’t be stubborn. Easily believing others is something very frivolous.”

“...”

“Do you think, just because I saved you from those Choir bastards, that I’m a good man who’ll save anyone and everyone?”

“I”

“Do you still not understand?”

Kusla suddenly stood still, and said with a serious look,

“It’s because it’s you that I saved you.”

Fenesis looked dumbfounded.

And then, it appeared she was slowly understanding what he was saying, and her cheeks gradually blushed.

However, she appeared to be on the verge of tears. Perhaps there had been people around her commenting on her without earshot that she was not worth that kind of value. The beast ears on her kept hearing words of disdain, words that rejected her, words that shunned her.

In a certain sense, Fenesis’ ears were truly a curse.

“Y-y-you really are—”

“I don’t know if you are going to say that I’m filthy waste, but as I had said before, don’t expect too much out of me to go about helping people unconditionally.”

Upon hearing those words, Fenesis, blushing furiously as she grabbed onto her habit by the chest, gave Kusla a forlorn look. Perhaps Kusla too was giving the same look.

He was an Alchemist, only interested in his own dreams. In other words, he would only devote his all for his own dream.

Kusla shrugged as he strode forth. Fenesis maintain a distance of a few paces behind him as she followed.

“I can’t turn lead into gold.”

He did not know whether Fenesis was listening, but he continued to look forward as he said,

“That lady’s problems are her own. The reason I settled yours is because yours overlapped with what I wanted to settle, that’s all.”

The duo went from a bustling street to a cramped alley, and past that was the workshop.

On the way back, Kusla turned back to Fenesis, saying,

“Alchemists will stray away when expecting something extraordinary during the process or the outcome. If the results of the refining are ideal, it is because of an angel’s blessings, and if it failed, a demon’s curse. Of course, there are people who wanted to make glasses so that they could find God, crystal vials to capture Undines, and those with such objectives are a different case altogether.”

Fenesis kept her head lowered, looking like an apprentice who was being told off.

Kusla continued on,

“Building relationships with others is the same thing. You should think of doing this for your own objectives, and not think of anything else. Those that know her, those that act because of her pain, will never end up well. ‘Kusla’ (Interest) is so feared by many, because it only works for its own benefit. Because of this, the interest will continue to add on, and fully move forward in this world filled with the lead-like pretense.”

Kusla actually did not wish to say such words.

But this was the conclusion he arrived at after having witnessed many facts in this world, so he had to.

And once he was done, he continued on with a sigh,

“I do wish that this world is a little more decent...but in this world, we don’t have time to make detours.”

In response to those words, Fenesis slowly shook her head,

“S-sorry...”

She was basically admitting that she knew nothing about the world.

Kusla then patted on her head with a little more force.

“To be honest, I’m kind of delighted that you do have some hope in me.”

He moved his hand away from the startled Fenesis, and continued,

“And this really is just like you.”

Kusla actually did this with the intention to assist Fenesis somewhat, but he had some other plans too. He wished for Fenesis to rely on him a little more.

But once he added on this line to coerce her into obeying him, he felt an inexplicable sense of guilt, and remained silent.

There was no doubt, she had the will of a precious metal.

Kusla let out a sigh, and continued on.

Perhaps Fenesis was too worn out during the day, as she began to sleep without waiting for dinner.

While the scent of the fat Pilchard soup caused her her nose to twitch slightly, she only took a little nibble of bread, and was completely spent.

She sat on the chair, sleeping with a pained look, and so Kusla was left with no choice but to carry her to the bedroom. She really isn't wary at all, and to think she's able to live peacefully until now; Kusla had such a thought as he dragged the blanket towards her mouth.

"If you want, I can head downstairs~"

Weyland continued to gnaw through the fish bones as Kusla closed the door by turning his hand back. Kusla merely shrugged; only a bored person who would bother with such a joke.

"Now then, what developments do you have there? Looks like you were wandering around town for till late."

Kusla sat at the chair where Fenesis just fell asleep on, and took a bite of the food she practically never touched as he asked.

"Hm, not much here. What about you~?"

"Just got some nice fish."

After they went to a Crafting Guild to obtain some purchase lists and request forms, Kusla went to investigate on the goods shipped in from the North, and the goods created by the town's blacksmiths, but he too did not obtain any information.

"Well, this workshop is a place far beyond our abilities after all."

"Hm? That's weak from you."

Unexpectedly, Kusla was not making a joke, and he said,

“This is something I concluded from the facts. There’s a monster called Thomas in this town, and he’s not the kind of person who’ll have such troubles.”

Kusla had a little look at the request forms he obtained from the Guild, and cocked an eyebrow.

“Basically all the requests are completed, so it’s written. I really feel so ordinary now.”

“Even I want to call him Master here~”

However, Thomas was easily killed because he did not notice what he should have. Life itself was really fragile, and they could not drag their feet if they wished to accomplish what they wanted while alive.

“And finally, what I hear here is that the Crest of Azami is moving faster than expected.”

“So that’s it, huh?”

“From the people I hear this from, there are a few prepared for ‘grooming’.”

To avoid needless scuffles and wroughting during the migration, some prostitutes who knew the pagan’s languages would go along too. Those chosen women did not know if they would return back to their old towns, so they would always prepare for whatever that would happen around them. Of course, they were also amped and preparing for battle to find a good man.

“Well, if those Azami’s Crest guys drag their feet about, they’ll probably get lots of requests at wherever they stop at. There are many like us who want to go to the new world, but are at their wits end.”

“Which Alchemists will be going?”

“Who knows...but well, probably someone whom the nobles and prince off the South really like. Probably someone suave and great unlike us who are sent here to clean up the mess after a battle.”

“Hmph, I really don’t want such people who call themselves Alchemists.”

Weyland snickered, but it was more of a wry smile,

“There are some outstanding ones who never overcame their past or have some maniacal dream.”

“...”

Kusla felt displeased at Weyland’s decent insight.

“What do you want to do?”

He’s lacking in his own usual despot.

Kusla had such a thought, and Weyland finished off the last of his wheat gruel before putting the wooden bowl onto the table. He put his legs onto the chair, pressed his chin onto his knee, and chuckled, saying,



“I really can’t stand my own ineptitude.”

Though he was giggling away in a silly manner, it was due to this that he appeared to be really self-deprecating.

“I do believe I’ll be chosen if I’m an Alchemist for another 20 years. Right now, I’m just a brat who’s just coming out.”

That’s being overconfident; he gave a little sneer. However, there was no way they could be chosen if they did not devote their all doing experiments with unknown outcomes, and search for new things.

The future will open up for them.

Even in this cruel, merciless world, Alchemists could believe in this.

“Then what about next time?”

Kusla said, and Weyland chuckled,

“The Goddess of Luck won’t leave anything behind. If you don’t reach out the moment she comes, you’ll never be able to catch her.”

Upon hearing these words, all Kusla could do was scratch his head.

“We got to be prepared to give up on our pride.”

Weyland then stared at Kusla, baring his teeth.

“You’re really open-minded. That is to be expected of you, Kusla.”

“I am an uncouth man after all.”

“That is a strength. Better to have fewer things to protect.”

Weyland said as he stood up.

He seemed to be pouting away, or so it seemed to Kusla.

“Is that a snide remark at me?”

“Hm?”

Weyland looked a little delighted as he smiled.

Kusla shrugged, and gnawed at the sliced, dried Herrings.

That night, Kusla and Weyland were in the underground workshop, discussing methods that could potentially let the Knights value them more.

They were mainly checking through the request forms Kusla brought from the Crafting Guild, but as expected, it was fruitless.”

“That Thomas really is a genius.”

Kusla gently placed the last request form onto the work desk, and Weyland cupped his hands behind his head as he rested on the chair backrest, sighing.

As Irine had said, the Crafting Guild had no less than 50 occupations, with dozens of metals they dealt with. Of course, there are numerous times the issues they wanted to improve as it inconvenienced their work. They would inquire the Knights on the issues they could not settle, or the issues they felt were solvable.

Of course, the Knights had no obligation to answer them, but no matter which town it was, the Knights would gather such requests. Typically, the extremely minor issues those unimpressive blacksmiths bring up would typically be fulfilled in some way.

The basis for research is typically due to a question posed. What is going on? Why did it happen? What materials will change into what? The more angles to these questions, the better.

And the Knights would surely lend money to the town. For the lenders, it would benefit them if the requested issues were improved on, and efficiency improved as a result.

Quite a nice plan, Kusla marveled.

It seemed Thomas made full use of this plan and exhibited all of his talent.

“I get the feeling that he did all he could when it comes to purifying metals as much as possible.”

Weyland could not help but comment.

There were a few treasure maps left on the table. However, Kusla and Weyland never did reach out for them, for it would not benefit them.

If these could be improved on, they certainly would be privileged by the Knights.

“Is this the only one we can work on now?”

“...”

Weyland did not answer, and instead sighed. Kusla used his fingers to pinch at a piece of paper, and written on it was the most important request form requesting the most important material in this world, metal, that even a genius like Thomas could not solve.

That would be regarding the mass production of metals.

“A research on improving the purity of metal can be done in a workshop too...”

“But mass production isn’t something that can be done with a few tricks like adding powdered bones and Birch wood~”

“Get dirty in mud and sweat, level the hills, and assemble bricks?”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Weyland closed his eyes, faced the ceiling, and protruded his lower lip.

“Us Alchemists are so low profile that we can’t possibly do such a thing~.”

Such a childish way of dismissing this caused Kusla to chuckle in bemusement.

“Draw out a design for a large furnace, hire a few dozen workers, spend a few years directing them on how to build it, and once it’s done, gather a few

craftsmen with decent skills and enthusiasm, supervise their work for days, and then look for the best method in the furnace, I guess?”

“The purity of such a metal will only be 80% of that in a workshop, but even that number is impressive enough. Isn’t this plan quite plausible here?”

“Yeah.”

Kusla said, and continued,

“But we aren’t looking to mass produce metal that won’t be of use.”

“Pure iron, or pure metal. If not...”

Weyland continued to face the ceiling with his eyes closed, saying in a prayerful manner.

“A perfect manner, the ultimate desire of an Alchemist.”

“Magdala.”

The moment Kusla uttered that term, Weyland let go of the hands cupped behind his head, and reverted to his usual pose.

“So, all we can do is to show interest in what was done in this little workshop. But this world is so big, so vast. Mankind’s purpose here is to race across this wide place.”

“You think it’s better to go about doing something that’s sloppy yet easy to do than to do something perfect yet hard to implement?”

“What can we do...what can we do? If there’s one way to get up there in one go~...”

This time, Weyland put his elbow on the table as he pondered.

“What method...huh?”

If they could find it, they would not need to be thinking so much.

An organization like the Knights would like to make use of that shockingly

large scale proposal to find that method. No matter how egoistical they were, Alchemists were willing to be subservient to the Knights so that they could make use of this power. Ultimately, Alchemists were just ordinary people.

We know this is the way of the world, but we do have some unshakeable resolve; Kusla wondered. As Weyland had said, their objective was to think of what they could do in this workshop, a refined, purified, thorough method.

They just needed to do this for themselves, and it did not matter whether the thing produced would benefit anyone else. It was because of this personality Kusla had that his master anointed him the name of 'Kusla' (Interest).

“Hm.”

While Kusla was groaning as he looked up at the ceiling.

A thud could be heard.

Kusla merely moved his eyes at that instant, for he did not want to let out a sound of his body moving or his clothes rustling.

Weyland too was the same, but the knocking persisted.

Kusla directed his sight upwards, and then at Weyland. The latter nodded, and shrugged.

A visitor?

Typically, an Alchemist's door being knocked on was not a good thing.

Furthermore, it was in the middle of the night, the time even the lackadaisical God would be asleep.

Weyland blew out the candle, and Kusla stood up in the darkness, moving towards the door tentatively.

If it was an assassin hired by a royal family or so, they could not be so calm. If it was a bandit or someone trying his luck, they still had a way out.

He went up a storey, and found that the bedroom behind the door remained

silent.

Don't wake up now; Kusla prayed. At the same time, the knocking occurred again, and he unhooked the clasp of the dagger at his waist.

There was still a candle lit in the living room, and Kusla had the urge to click his tongue. If there was a candle lit, that meant that they could not pretend that nobody was around, so he had no choice but to ask,

“Who's that?”

He approached the door, and in any case, asked.

Right when he expected it to be a drunk or a prankster, the other party gave an unexpected answer,

“...I'm someone...from the Crafting Guild...”

It was likely that the other party was straining his throat, causing the voice to change. Even so, Kusla could hear that the other party summoned all his courage to say these words.

He frowned, looking extremely perplexed, but still answered,

“Your voice sounds familiar.”

And he could immediately hear the sound of someone recoiling in shock.

Perhaps the man merely gasped, but Kusla buckled back the clasp of his dagger.

“I'm the man...who passed you during the day...”

The man quickly confessed, so Kusla approached the door, and unlocked it.

He could see a middle-aged man standing in front of the door, a handkerchief over his head as he gave a wretched smile.

Act 3

The blacksmith named Clock Ings wanted to force a smile, but he obviously failed. It was probably due to the tension he felt after arriving at an Alchemist's workshop, and typically, he never had to show a fake smile to others.

A blacksmith able to open shop in a port town can be considered one of the famous people in town.

The sleazy, greasy face seemed akin to polished leather, and the flesh on the shoulders were lumped up, the clothes ostensibly ripping apart. The stout, short legs of a man who was used to moving heavy objects over a long time were spread outwards, unable to be as they used to be. These signs seemed to indicate that the man was an outstanding blacksmith.

However, Kusla noticed those eyes. Every single part of his body was sculpted to be a blacksmith, refined intricately, yet those eyes of his were filled with childish immaturity.

After Kusla waved him in, the man still did not calm down, and this exhibited his immaturity. One could determine another person's nature from his gestures.

"I do apologize for this sudden visit."

And so, it was not surprising that when he sat at the table, he greeted Kusla, younger than him, and an Alchemist.

However, he was after all a blacksmith of a Crafting Guild, and to maintain the courtesy, Kusla served him wine.

"It is true that I was taken aback."

Kusla's tone switched to that of an unfamiliar one, and with his hand, he gestured for the man to drink.

The man merely looked back and forth at the clay mug and Kusla himself

with a terrified look, and did not reach out to grab it.

All the items produced here were cursed, and they contained poison.

One had to wonder if he really believed such a superstition, but most people who interacted with Alchemists were probably this way. Again, Kusla recognized how defenseless Fenesis was.

“Mr Ings, you are in the metalcraft, I suppose?”

His appearance, coupled with the Crafting Guild being centered around metalworkers, prompted Kusla to ask.

“Eh, yes...I opened a workshop in this town.”

“Oh.”

A reputed blacksmith of the Guild.

This master, Ings, appeared to be a child with his body the only thing grown, and he remained slumped on the chair without a purpose. Kusla could not determine the purpose of his visit.

Kusla proceeded to dip his lips in his own wine, and said,

“Are you alright with coming to this place? As a master, you should pay more attention to your reputation, no?”

Kusla said with some sarcasm, and Ings then gritted his teeth.

However, it seemed he was unable to force a smile.

“I have to strike when the iron is hot.”

Strike when the iron is hot?

Kusla felt surprised, and could not help but look at Ings.

“I suppose it is really an unusual thing.”

A reputed citizen would wrap a towel around his head and avoid all human stares to come to this alchemist workshop.

The only thing Kusla could think of was that the man was begging for poison.

Before he arrived at this port town, he was locked in jail, and he teased the jailers with what appeared to be poison. There was an inseparable bond between Alchemists and poison.

And as long as it concerned rank, prestige and money, there would be a circulation of poison.

However if he was to do this, would the man get any benefit that would be worth the risk of poisoning someone?

Kusla immediately thought of the Stibnite, but Ings' rough face showed a contorted smile as he said,

"I do feel this will benefit both of us."

"...Benefit?"

Poison was undoubtedly used for assassination, but Kusla could not think of any possible benefits they might share. But even so, Ings merely nodded slightly. Whenever he nodded, the flesh on his chin would bulge, and he would resemble a toad.

"What is the thing that will benefit both of us? A new method of refining?"

The reason why Alchemists were Alchemists was because they could calmly execute the experiments the cautious, face-saving blacksmiths. In certain rare circumstances, some blacksmiths would want to try out such methods, but were after of being watched, so they could ask the Alchemists for help.

Kusla assumed that it would be such a thing, but Ings pretentiously shook his head abruptly.

Even his smile was brighter than before.

It seemed he was excited to be negotiating with an Alchemist.

Kusla noticed Ings' childish expression; no matter how much Ings did refine his skills, he never left this town before, never spoke with anyone other than his acquaintances, and never saw the world.

“Well...you can put it this way.”

That expression of his appeared to be letting out a little snicker.

Kusla nearly showed a displeased look, but in the next instance, his face froze because of what Ing said.

“Do you know about the Azami's Crest?”

Kusla stared at Ings as the latter hushed his voice.

He folded his legs again as he remained seated on the chair.

This probably was not something private.

“Yes. It sounds like they will be passing by this town.”

“We wish to be part of the first migrants.”

Kusla thought of the first time he visited this workshop when he came to this town.

Blacksmiths would prepare all kinds of parchments recording metallurgy skills for the Alchemists, awaiting the Alchemists' arrival. These Guild blacksmiths, under the domain of the Knights, believed that if they were to be on good terms with the Alchemists who were on close terms with the Knights, they too would have a better relationship with the Knights as a result.

For blacksmiths, they preferred a practical benefit to be valued by the Knights, rather than their own honor, and undoubtedly, they did it all for this day.

Kusla recalled that a generation ago, this bustling town of Gulbetty was one of the many port cities under the Pagan's rule.

In other words, Ings' master and the others surely were from some countryside, and came to this town with only their tools. They then established a decent Guild, and obtained an important position in this town. What about the next generation though?

Kusla felt a sense of unpleasant camaraderie with the reason why Ings came to this town. If they wanted to establish themselves in a town that had calmed down after the chaos, and order was established, they would have to endure an unreasonably long time. In this place called a town, human relationships were fixed; masters were masters, and apprentices were apprentices.

After a long time of apprenticeship and goofer work, he became a disciple, and after another long 5-10 years of fruitless days, he was recognized as a blacksmiths, and after another few years of honing his craft, he finally had the authority from his master to open a workshop.

If the town was still expanding, this would not be a terrible situation, but if the town had expanded, and a new workshop had to be opened, there were many times when they would have to wait for a certain person to vacate the workshop he opened, and take over.

Even if his luck was fine, that he was deemed by his master to be able to capable of running his own show, the duties in the Guild would typically be occupied by the men more experienced than he was, and they had no intention of leaving these positions behind. Furthermore, their skill levels might not differ much. if he were unlucky, he would have to serve under someone else even though his skills were overwhelming superior, and all he could do was to live every single day, gritting his teeth.

The path to promotion was blocked, and even if they were driven to death, all they could do was to live uneventful lives.

In that case, like the previous generation, he would go to the new world, and become a prominent citizen there.

Kusla could understand their feelings;

Weyland said before that he was confident that he would be recognized by the Knights for his accomplishments in another 20 years. However, 20 years was too long, and such a life was really underwhelming.

Kusla stared at Ings. Though the latter's eyes were filled with childish innocence, oblivious to the ways of the world, there was some shred of truth.

“Because of this, I want to ask for your strength.”

He paused, and stared right at Kusla's eyes, saying,

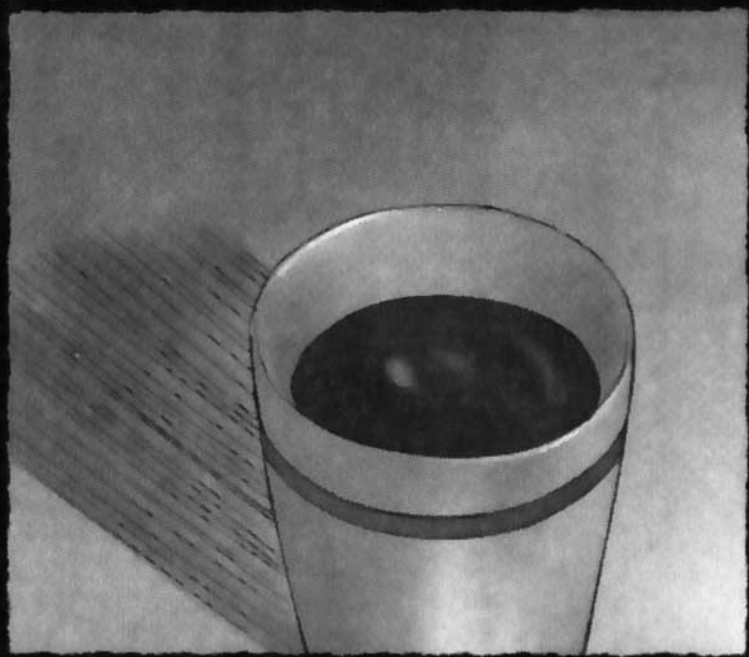
“This is a plea to you, the Restless Alchemist.”

In other words, they had investigated Kusla and Weyland.

Once Ings said this, he showed a self-deprecating smile.

Perhaps he would show such a face too if he wanted to sell his soul to the Devil.

“We have an information on some kind of unique metal. If we can produce such a metal, surely we will be able to use this accomplishment, and be chosen as part of the initial settlers.”



“Unique metal?”

Kusla asked, “—” and Ings then hoarsely muttered something.

At that moment, Kusla widened his eyes, practically saying this is impossible.

Ings’ self-deprecating smile reached its apex.

“Both of us can benefit from this.”

He stood up, saying,

“If you really wish to discuss this with us, please come to the Wolson Ironwares in the market. Also...please keep it a secret.”

Ings then again wrapped a towel around his head, leaving the workshop.

Kusla remained dumbfounded, unable to stand up.

The moment he recovered, Weyland, who anticipated when Ings would bid farewell, came up to this level.

He, who was still snickering away foolishly, hid his smile once he saw Kusla.

“What happened~?”

Kusla did not answer immediately.

Ings mentioned something that was long lost in the river of time, a metal that was rendered a myth.

“Damascus Steel.”

“Hm?”

“It sounds like they have a clue regarding the construction of Damascus Steel.”

“...”

These unusual words left Weyland speechless, and with his mouth shut, he looked at the window.

Damascus Steel was such an extraordinary thing. If such a metal was used to forge a sword, the sword produced would be deemed a rare, meaningful sword, the value would far surpass any appraisal and practicality, and it would be something highly exalted.

Furthermore, unlike the God's metal Orichalcum, Damascus Steel truly existed. Kusla did see the real thing before. It had the appearance of wooden grain, as intriguing as bread of a different color that was left to set, truly a spooky steel. It was said that wearing it on the wear alone would allow one to evade arrows, and shoo off the wild beasts in the forests.

For the forces who were hoping to head to the pagan towns that were crushed, this would be the one reward they would yearn most.

“...But is such a rumor really believable?”

It was again something so implausible, perhaps it would be better to go mining in the hills.

Kusla did not answer this extremely serious worry. Weyland scratched his head, and sighed, giving Kusla a forsaken look.

“Well, normally, we'll think of this as such nonsensical bluff.”

“Not so coincidentally for us, there's something unbelievable in this workshop, and we never actually thought that it would exist not too long ago.”

Weyland shrugged, and chimed “I guess.”

“Also, the method to produce bronze, so commonplace nowadays, was once lost. There are such coincidences in the world of metallurgy...”

“It'll be a pity if we give up on it now.”

While they were overwhelmed by Thomas Blanket's talent and cornered, someone came to them, offering an anecdotal rumor. Kusla looked at the wine that was left untouched on the table. Perhaps he would believe it if

someone told him Ings was a hallucination formed from the darkness.

However, Kusla was an Alchemist, and Alchemists seek the Land of Magdala.

This itself was a myth that surpassed all myths.

Kusla's lips showed a sneer.

"Let's do what we can do."

Weyland shrugged, and sighed, showing a sneer as well.

While the epithet 'Restless Alchemist' might be a hyperbole, Kusla did occasionally do some things befitting of it.

His nose scented upon a sour stench, and it turned out the candle was exhausted, the wick all burned out.

This was when Kusla realized that it was dawn, and he stretched his back.

Unknowingly to him, Weyland had already fallen asleep on the work desk. It was typical for Weyland to go without sleep for 2, 3 days when it came to burning the furnace and carrying out experiments, but even such a man appeared inept at reading books. Kusla was the opposite; as long as he was buried in the world of books, his body could ignore all instincts and devote itself unflinchingly to reading books.

But even so, it was rather tiring.

After adding wood to the fireplace as the fire was weakened, Kusla pushed the door aside and stood in front of the water wheel. He took a deep breath, inhaling the morning air, and washed his face. At that moment, he felt a sensation of being 'alive'.

He shook his head about, let his bones creak, and with renewed vigor, entered the workshop again. He and Weyland spent the entire night reading up on

books involving metals; some of them were the books left behind by their predecessor Thomas Blanket, and some were shipped into this workshop by Kusla and Weyland.

Damascus Steel was still a mythical thing, but it was an actual material, not something nobody had never saw before. It was the stuff of legends only because the method to create it was lost, and there was an extreme rarity of it

And thus, if one was to read through original records of ancient empire events, and focus the investigations on ancient items, one would find a few records of Damascus steel.

However, they found no clues that would infer the production for it.

The books noted that the people who produced such steel were living in villages situated in deserts, that creating such a steel would require a crucible buried in the sand.

After flipping through some relatively recent information, they found some specific descriptions. The description of the underground Crucible appeared a few times, and there were descriptions that after the Crucible was buried, they would utter a spell of the Sun God the desert inhabitants worshipped, and after pouring some camel blood into the Crucible, they were able to purchase Damascus Steel.

However, if any rich person with the curiosity to purchase something like camels wanted to, this would not be a difficult chore. With regards to worshipping the Sun God, it was probably not too difficult to decipher them, given the Crusade that had lasted more than 2 decades, and that they had accumulated a vast amount of knowledge with regards to the faraway lands.

But even so, they heard no news about Damascus Steel being created successfully. It was likely the methods the books mentioned were merely a hoax.

An experiment could determine it, but Kusla already had much difficulty

obtaining Stibnite, let alone a camel.

And furthermore, Kusla was not a novice at this. He could vaguely determine whether the records were reliable.

While pondering as he flipped through the books, he heard a sound coming from upstairs.

Kusla did not feel wary as a result, for he could distinguish the noises of a living thing against the sounds of an intruder.

He scaled the stairs, and arrived at the upper level, finding Fenesis seated on the chair, in front of the messy table, still groggy.

“You woke up really early.”

Kusla greeted, and the fur on her ears pricked immediately, causing her to widen her eyes in shock.

It appeared she had fallen asleep.

“Ah, yes.”

“You went to sleep without having dinner yesterday, and you’re now hungry after waking up, right?”

“...”

Once Kusla said this, Fenesis appeared to be trying to refute it, but had no strength to do so.

Her face was full of awkwardness, for typically, she would say that a breakfast was too much of a luxury, and would simply drink goat’s milk instead. Kusla shrugged, merely telling her “I’ll prepare good”, took some fire from the furnace downstairs, and entered the kitchen.

“Once you’re done eating, go sleep for a while.”

“But I’m already...”

“Talk after you’re done eating.”

“...”

Fenesis desperately fiddled with an oversized wooden spoon as she nibbled at the wheat gruel cooked in hot goat milk. Looking displeased, she moved her little mouth saying.

“I’m fine even if I don’t sleep.”

She probably was not simply saying this out of stubbornness. When doing refining work, one probably would be unable to sleep after getting the body moving.

But Kusla went straight to the point, saying,

“We’re not doing manual labor today. We’re going to war against sleep.”

“Eh?”

“This is a work that suddenly came to us. Can you read the words?”

This sudden request caused Fenesis to cringe her neck back, and she nodded.

“We’re going to investigate on a certain metal. We’re going to browse through all the books here.”

“...”

The gruel dripped from the wooden spoon, and Fenesis finally managed to recover.

There was a countless number of books in this workshop.

“Oh ho, you don’t want to do this?”

Fenesis immediately pricked her ears, shaking her head.

Her eyes were determined.

Pitiful was Fenesis’ personality to abide by any orders she was given, but in some situations, it might be a handy tool. Kusla thought of how his thought process was exactly the same as the Choir, and was left flabbergasted.

However, whenever there was a tool to be used, it should be used.

“Well, there are some things you have to learn when it comes to investigations. Also, this is urgent, so I’ll answer every question you have seriously. Pay attention when that comes.”

“...”

Fenesis gave a displeased look, but after a few seconds, she nodded.

Also, this time, her appearance was that of a nun with a sense of conviction.

“But go to sleep now. That is your job now.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then if you’re going to fall asleep during the day, I’m going to stab a finger into your ear.”

“!”

This long forgotten fear caused her face to be contorted, and her ears drooped.

“You’ll feel much better with a nap after lunch. The weather’s fine today, and the allure of falling asleep in the sunlight is rather scary.”

“...I-I’m not a cat!”

“Hm?”

Kusla retorted with a mocking sneer, and Fenesis’ face remained stiff as she continued eating her wheat gruel, but after two mouthfuls, she said, appearing to have given up,

“I think, I should have a nap...after having breakfast...”

“Hm, smart choice.”

“...”

Fenesis let out a gentle sigh, and again put a mouthful of wheat gruel into her

mouth. Then, it appeared she noticed something as she spoke up.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?”

“Hm?”

“Last night...you never returned to the bedroom.”

Weyland preferred to sleep in front of a furnace, so there were only two beds in the bedroom.

Kusla however was not as primitive as Weyland, and he preferred to have a nice sleep on the bed.

“And you look tired too.”

She showed a worried look as she said those words.

Kusla certainly would feel a little peeved to accept her worry so obediently. Thus, he stroked his chin, answering,

“After lunch, I’ll go find a nice sunny place to nap at.”

“...”

Fenesis stared blankly at Kusla, and then seemed to have realized something as she averted her eyes.

“Are you thinking it may be better to sleep like that?”

“!!”

Once Fenesis’ thoughts were anticipated, she let out a little blush.

However, Fenesis napping in the afternoon sun would be a scene fitting for a painting.

Kusla thought with some seriousness, but Fenesis immediately said,

“I do whatever you task me to do. Just as before, and will be.”

She straightened her back, her face as solemn as one swearing an oath to God. For an Alchemist, her actions were overly direct, and it was again

another obtuse, obstinate declaration.

But in this sense, she did have some delicate charm. Kusla knew that her manner of speak was an imitation of himself.

“Make sure not to go overboard.”

“...”

Fenesis gave Kusla a displeased look.

“I shall look forward to it then.”

Once Kusla said that, Fenesis pretentiously scowled as she finished the rest of her wheat gruel.

Surely Irine and the masters were squabbling over the issue of Damascus Steel when Kusla and Fenesis visited the Guild.

The Damascus Steel was enough for those who desired to fulfill many years of unfulfilled wishes, left with nowhere to go, to press on with it. However, Damascus Steel itself was of no fault. It contained an equivalent value to revival, and its actual existence was enough to provide a glimmer of hope.

With a wry smile, Kusla appeared in this actual town that was bustling with life.

If this really was a con, he should given up and and work hard in this town instead.

“So, Wolson’s shop is here?”

Kusla approached an apprentice who was putting metal pots, ladles, pokers and unfinished metal parts at the shop.

He had assumed that the apprentice would be rattled by him, but it appeared that Wolson did notify his apprentice beforehand, for the latter did not panic as he merely nodded, and entered the shop.

The shop was shoddy, with only metal poles standing from the ground, holding out what appeared to be a sturdy piece of cloth that formed the walls and ceiling. However, this certainly was a shop. Wolson opened a shop here for several years, and decades later, the words ‘the metalworker Wolson died here’ would be inscribed here on his tombstone.

But if this shop was participating in the Damascus Steel plot, Wolson would surely be yearning a more glorious life, and not spend his life peacefully.

There were many who desired success, but too few who could obtain it. While Kusla fondled the rim of a metal cup as he pondered, the cloth in the shop parted, and a lanky man with a stubble walked out.

“Ings told me about it. Come in.”

“...”

Surely it was not a good thing for any reputed citizen to greet an Alchemist in his own shop.

But if the people selling metals in the markets were doing this, there would be many plausible explanations.

Ings did not dare ask Kusla into his own workshop, so he could only use this workshop as a disguise.

“Please allow me to introduce myself. I am the metalworker Ander Wolson.”

“Kusla.”

“I heard of you. I heard you fought to protect Mr Blanket’s house of knowledge.”

“...”

Kusla could not determine which words were said out of courtesy, and which words were said in a joking manner, so he ignored Wolson’s words and scanned the shop. It appeared all the produce was put in the shop, and there were a few broken, rusted arrows in the shop. The swords were plain in style,

and it was impossible to find such swords in this area.

“I was mesmerized by the intelligence of the Ancients.”

Wolson said, and grinned. Of course, the lanky, stubbled figure resembled a traveller who arrived from a distant Desert Country.

“Were you born there?”

“No, it is a shame to say this, but I never did leave this town before.”

Once Wolson said this, he picked up a piece of cloth placed in a corner of the shop, and with ease and familiarity, wrapped it around his head.

He said he was ashamed, but he did not appear to be. He was born in this town, yet he was so passionate about foreign flairs; perhaps he was ruthlessly mocked by others before, and inadvertently became ashamed as a result.

“It was probably about 10 years ago, when this town was not that grand in scale. The Imperial Army marched North to purge the Pagans, and there were a few desert inhabitants in the Army. Well, they were really standing out, and I was immediately captivated. After that, I kept collecting all kinds of things related to the desert.”

“You want to try holding a staff and carry a haversack around one day?”

“Yes. It is my dream to see the desert moon at night.”

Wolson grinned.

Anyone near him would have thought of him as a weirdo with strange thoughts.

Kusla noticed some items placed in the shop, like a metal snake figurine, a transparent glass bottle filled with yellow sand, an aged parchment with wriggly-like foreign words, and a metal water bottle with a delicate bottleneck, a bottle nobody in this land would use.

Certainly, the emotion called ‘like’ would render anyone helpless.

Kusla looked at Wolson, and gave a sneer.

“I heard you have some clues with regards to Damascus Steel.”

“Hm, but...”

“Yes?”

“I can’t be certain how reckless Ings and the others will be...”

Wolson gave Kusla an apprehensive look.

Kusla had a good impression of Wolson.

For the latter was someone who could stop and look around.

“He merely said that if I have interest, I’m to come to this shop. However, I saw that Ings was arguing with a few other masters. Does the Guild have some secret?”

When faced with Kusla’s question, Wolson appeared to be apprehensive about saying something.

Like a bread that was eaten because there was no strange odor to it, yet this bread might be rotten at this moment.

It was that kind of a face he showed.

“In fact, it is a very simple matter now.”

Wolson said.

“I wanted to know about something regarding the desert country, and no matter what, as long as the object had something to do with the desert, I wanted to obtain it. So, I often visited the central citizens of the town, the initial members of the Crafting Guild, inquiring about the situation in the distant lands, and I asked every single one of them. In fact, one of the now-deceased masters once teased me when I was still young, that they knew of a secret, the desert miracle called the Damascus Steel.”

Wolson looked devoid of self-esteem, and perhaps it was because he was not

interested in the idea of Damascus Steel instead. Also, on further thought, the reputed blacksmiths valued by the town would never sake this myth called the Damascus Steel, for they would be deemed as ‘heretics’, people that strayed from the Order. Damascus Steel itself was such a rare metal itself, any ordinary person would take it as a random topic when having chats over drinks, and nobody would ever delve deep into it.

“And so?”

“S-so, Ings and the others heard of this from me, and they felt that the Guild...no, in any case, they felt that the old masters of this town definitely hid the secrets of Damascus Steel. I can understand their feelings though. If they can create Damascus Steel...it will be an impressive accomplishment...you are discussing about migrating, right?”

“Yeah, we’re planning to head to the new world.”

Once Kusla said this, Wolson gave a forlorn smile.

Surely, humans would sneer at rumors of Damascus Steel, and laughed it off, and after years of it, they forgot about it. The master back then told Wolson about this rumor that would have damaged anyone’s reputation as a joke, for that master knew very well what kind of a scenery was in this room.

Wolson remained a big child who yearned for the desert.

And thus, when Ings and the others jumped upon the rumors with regards to Damascus Steel for profit, Wolson, who yearned for his dream, might be feeling perturbed as a result.

“I have no interest in moving North. You probably noticed now that I’ve been viewed as a strange one by everyone else in this town, and so, I’m just being used by Ings and the others for their benefit.”

For example, someone like you is called to my shop.

Wolson’s eyes were betraying such an expression, but Kusla merely lifted his

chin slightly.

“One question. What is the name of the master who told you about the Damascus Steel?”

Wolson hesitated.

However, he probably realized that Kusla would obtain the answer from Ings and the others, so he slowly uttered the name,

“Master Brunner.”

The deceased husband of the current Crafting Guild chairperson, Irine.

So Ings and the others were interrogating Irine at the Crafting Guild for this reason. Kusla finally understood.

“Those people think that Irine inherited such a secret.”

“Eh?”

Wolson let out a surprised squeal.

“...”

“Huh? Irine was mesmerized by her husband’s skills, no?”

“...”

Wolson remained stunned, utterly speechless.

This was when Kusla understood realized the common assumption of every person in this town with regards to Irine.

“I see. The reason you’re so shocked is because pretty much everyone in this town assumed that Irine got married with the objective of his position and fortune. Ings and the others tried to threaten Irine into letting them check on Brunner’s inheritance.”

That was why Irine looked utterly furious.

Irine was not furious at the words they said to her, but to protect the honor of

the departed. No matter the relationship Brunner had with Damascus Steel, if anyone had assumed Brunner was seeking such a thing, it would implicate the deceased's dignity.

That was why Irine yelled out about honor.

Wolson's face looked contorted due to anguish.

However, Kusla instead bared his teeth, showing a smile, saying,

"I don't know anything about Master Brunner, so I do not have any bias about this. However, it seems everyone's bias against Irine is this much here. Now I'm a little curious too. How old was Robert Brunner?"

Wolson appeared reluctant to answer as he averted his eyes, but he still sighed, saying,

"Rather than have you ask someone else and hear some scathing words from them, I shall bear the sin of idle chatter then."

"A large difference between them, I suppose."

"When he married Miss Irine, Master Brunner was already into his seventies."

"..."

Many mothers would die due to childbirth, so no matter how decent a man, if they yearned for a heir, they would marry a second, third wife, and this was not a rare occurrence. But even so, there had to be a limit. He was of such old age, and married such a young wife; to a bystander, he would be a lecherous old man indulgent in lust, fooled by a vixen eyeing his fortune."

"Also, Miss Irine is not a local. She's born in a country far away, a place called Clazini."

"Clazini? A famous swordcrafting town. No wonder."

She had some feisty looking red hair, and was strong.

It was probably because Irine was born in such a town that she was mesmerized by metal.

“Many of the masters in this town were born there, so Miss Irine probably came here to reunite with her compatriots. It was about 5-6 years ago when she came here, and I heard that she came to this town with a firm. After a few setbacks, she was taken in by her compatriot, the retired Master Brunner’s workshop, and did some chores. Master Brunner has no heir; his ex-wife died of illness 20 years ago, before he arrived in this time. His apprentices went out to venture and hone their crafts, so he was the only one managing the workshop. The people around him probably felt that he was feeling lonely, but his sudden marriage caused everyone a shock. Some rumors implied that he intended to marry and find a heir to his fortune. Without a wife, if he did not marry, most of the authority and fortune would not be inherited.

“Oh, I see.”

“But...if Miss Irine really married Master Brunner for the sake of his fortune, there would be smarter ways to go about doing it. She definitely would not take over the role of Guild chairperson, I suppose.”

Since the Guild was controlled by the Knights, the position of chairperson was merely an ornament. There was no benefit to taking this position, and furthermore, the blacksmiths would be complaining about this and that all the time.”

“I do find Miss Irine to be doing well as a chairperson, and surely she’s not the kind of person everyone else says. Thus, seeing how she works hard at this role, it doesn’t seem like she was forced into this position.”

“In other words, Irine took that position on her own volition?”

“Perhaps that may be Master Brunner’s wish, or perhaps Miss Irine isn’t terrified of being hurt by everyone around her, and the reason why she decided to marry Master Brunner. There are many blacksmiths like Ings and

the others who wish to leave this town.”

“They don’t have any respect for what their seniors built at all?”

Kusla looked at Wolson, and the latter gave Kusla a tragic stare.

Perhaps it was because he was such an eccentric man obsessed with the country in the desert, that he was so concerned by Irine, isolated by everyone else in the Guild.

Perhaps he felt that what he so happened to hear from Master Brunner caused unnecessary burden for Irine, who was already bogged down by her circumstances.

“Thus, I wish to request something.”

Wolson looked at Kusla.

“I wish that you do not hurt Miss Irine anymore.”

His eyes were staring right at Kusla’s.

Before he answered, Kusla averted his eyes, for he immediately realized why Wolson would promise Ings and the others to use his own shop as a place to discuss with an Alchemist. If he had no interest in Damascus Steel and migrating, and if he was not manipulated by them, there was no reason for him to help them.

But even so, he still summoned Kusla to this shop, all for the sake of discussing this matter.

The eccentric man who fell in love with the desert country.

Of course, nobody would probably marry him.

Due to his deep ties with his business and the Guild, Wolson was captivated by the young Irine. To Kusla, Irine did make for a fine young lady. One could imagine that she was probably one of the few ladies that could interact with a man like Wolson without any prejudices.

But Kusla did not even sigh as her looked at Wolson, and the latter immediately shuddered, inadvertently backing.

“My name is ‘Kusla’ (interest). Once I have my eyes on something, I will proceed on. Just as a high interest of an usury will continue to grow, showing no sympathy for the debtor, I will continue to move on without a care for to stop for any reason.

A completely inhumane Alchemist.

Wolson appeared as though he had just realized this.

“No matter what happens to irine, my aim will always be that Damascus Steel. If Master Brunner has that little clue, I will cling onto it and never let go until I get that clue.”

He never intended to patronize Wolson’s wishes, let alone Ings’ matter.

He understood that Ings wanted to keep this a secret from the Guild, but it was Ings’ fault for daring to reveal such a secret to an Alchemist with that little conviction.

On the other hand, Wolson appeared to be on the verge of tears, the veins on his neck throbbing.

His right fingers were twitching like an insect’s legs.

Was he planning to arm himself with a weapon?

Kusla gave a smirk, and narrowed his eyes, saying,

“But that woman doesn’t look like the kind to succumb to threats. I got to find a suitable method.”

“...”

“For example, there are ways to get that woman to fall for you, and draw out some clues from her, right?”

He gave an impish smirk, and Wolson’s goody-goody face immediately

blushed.

Those advanced in age would find it harder to smile.

Amongst the Alchemists, there were some that remained childish and innocent, chasing their dreams no matter how old they were.

And those that harbored real dreams will never remain calm when faced with their dreams.

Kusla never resented Wolson, for he sensed that Wolson had a scent that resembled him.

“At the very least, I’m better at prying something out than someone like Ings.”

Upon hearing this, Wolson immediately drooped his head.

It appeared to Kusla that he was giving a bow.

However, Kusla raised an eyebrow, and sighed.

His instincts as an Alchemist were telling him that things were getting complicated.

The sun was already up the moment he left Wolson’s shop, and it was the liveliest, bustling moment of the town. The weather was clear, nary a gust, and as the crowd pushed each other around, sweat dripped down their backs immediately.

And Kusla, stuck in that crowd, finally made it back to the workshop. He opened the door, and saw Fenesis lift her head as though she was hit.

“...”

“...”

Kusla stared at Fenesis as he closed the door behind him, and Fenesis wiped her mouth with one hand, the other hand holding a thick book as she stared at him. Kusla remained silent as he kept his eyes on her, and found that her eyes

were obviously fluttery.

“You fell asleep, didn’t you?”

“I-I didn’t!”

She looked foolish as she answered. Kusla shrugged, and walked to the kitchen.

“Is Weyland downstairs?”

The fire created to heat up breakfast was not put out, and Kusla added some coal into the furnace, and put a metal bottle into a pot filled with water. The bottle contained grape wine.

“...He’s here.”

After hearing Fenesis’ answer, Kusla said.

“How do you know when you’re sleeping.”

“I wasn’t!”

Rather than a show of obstinacy, it appeared the threat of stuffing the fingers into her fingers if she fell asleep worked really well. Kusla boiled the water, heated the grape wine, and as he returned to the living room, Fenesis had the appearance of a convict in his cell, awaiting execution.

“Time for punishment.”

Kusla said as he stood behind Fenesis, and her body stiffened like a metal rod stuck into her back.

“Don’t move.”

Kusla took a metal bottle, bend down and brought his face to the back of Fenesis’ neck, using his nose to gently prick the white long hair aside.

Fenesis was so tense all over, unable to move even if she wanted to.

She probably did not know what was going to happen; no, what Kusla

wanted to do.

After bending down for a while, Kusla finally straightened his back, and exhaled.

“Hm.”

That was when Fenesis tentatively placed her hand on her neck, looking to be on the verge of tears as she turned back to look at Kusla. The book called Hell’s Tour states that once the cursed worms were born on the sinners, the sinners would look exceptionally devastated. At this point, Fenesis was showing such a face.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“...”

“You have a nice milky scent on you.”

Kusla putted the metal bottle onto the table, went towards the stairs, poked his head out, and checked on the situation downstairs. He found some movement below, and it appeared Weyland was there.

Kusla’s eyes looked back at the table, and Fenesis continued to press at the back of her neck, stiff and unable to move.

“Your face is red.”

“L-like I know!”

And then, the teary face and ears sank.

“Well, leaving that aside for now, how is the investigation going?”

Fenesis rubbed the back of her neck in a panicky manner, ostensibly tearing it off. Once she heard Kusla’s words, she wordlessly handed over a wooden word. This board was used as a notebook; there was wax on the board, and words carved out with a sharp pencil. At this point, the wooden board had the names of a few books and some information of Damascus Steel.

“Eh. You found that much in such a short time, huh?”

“...”

Fenesis remained teary eyed, and even though she was praised, her face showed no signs of happiness. Kusla really found her to be showing such a nice, docile face, but he merely casted her efforts aside, pouring the wine into a wooden mug, saying,

“Seeing how fast you work, I suppose you can be of help when you really work hard.”

“Hm?”

“Once we’re done with our meals, we’ll go to the Baggage Corps Headquarters. I got some work for you.”

“Erm...”

“Your job to sleep hasn’t changed. Don’t sleep too much.”

“I-I won’t fall asleep again.”

Fenesis pressed upon the back of her neck as she said.

Kusla remained unmoved by Wolson’s plea, but there was something he had to do before he inquired Irine about the Damascus Steel.

Assuming that her husband Robert Brunner knew about the secrets of Damascus Steel, a conclusion could be made. When they were making their pilgrimage, they had to prove their expertise in their craft. Thus, if the thing about Damascus Steel was true, surely they would have proven it with Damascus Steel.

So, why did they head to the Baggage Corps Headquarters? That was because Irine said that before the Knights ruled this town, the Bukulgs firm was the one financing the Crafting Guild. They probably had proof of financing the

Crafting Guild, one of the strongest Guilds in the town, and because of that, they were devoured by the greedier Knights. The building was absorbed by the Knights, and used.

Thus, logically, the records back then should be left there.

“Based on the records, the documents back then were put in this corner.”

A young caretaker with fine blonde hair said to Kusla as he flipped through a few pieces of parchment. At this point, they were current in the underground warehouse, the stench of mold filling the place.

“The important documents involving authority have been separated, and without Master Autris’ permission...”

“Hm, we don’t need that thing now. All these are what we probably need.”

The underground warehouse was filled with shelves, and Kusla unceremoniously grabbed a roll of parchments that was stuffed in there, taking a look.

The parchments flapped crispy, so brittle they could have tore apart at that moment. Once they were unraveled and brought to a candle flame, the ancient records arose along with the burnt stench of dust.

“These are documents that aren’t being used now, but be careful with the fire. The water bucket is outside, and if you need to holler, the voice will echo up there.”

“Understood. I’m not a child.”

“...Please proceed.”

The boy who led them maintained a mystified look until the very end, and he shut the heavy door, probably with the intent of preventing the fire from spreading. Kusla heard the footsteps ascent the stairs, “Now then.” and said, “Let’s begin.”

Fenesis beside him was probably reminded of the monastery as she nodded silently.

“We’re looking for any written records of those men from the Guild who came to this town, like requests or such.”

Kusla picked a suitable book from high up a rack, and handed them to Fenesis one by one. One had to wonder if Fenesis was coughing due to the dust or the mold as she turned aside to cough.

“Ignore the details for now. Find the relevant ones, and hand them to me.”

Fenesis was not one who was adept at being flexible, but if she was tasked with an objective, she would quietly finish it. There was a table placed in the warehouse, and Fenesis dragged a chair over to sit beside it, indulging in her work. She scanned through every word diligently, and as long as the words and names she was instructed to search for appeared, she would hand every document to Kusla.

The pressure the firm exerted on the Guild did not appear to be any less than the Knights, and there were all sorts of requests left behind. Many blacksmiths were unhappy that the firm was using its authority to monopolize supply of the materials, and use the downpayments to rob them of their profits, resulting in much scathing criticism.

There were also a few instances of some prominent blacksmiths banding together, requesting for a drop in material prices, a delivery batch, or a decrease in interest.

The name Robert Brunner appeared often in these request forms, and it was obvious that he was of quite a standing amongst the blacksmiths back then.

The documents in the shelves were uncategorized, unsorted to age, and were put together clumsily, so they did not know what they would find. First off, Kusla was looking for something really old, and so he began searching through the bookshelves, starting from the really dirty ones.

And on the other hand, Fenesis was fingering each word, checking the contents; her face as she held her breath looked as though it was soaked in salt water. Besides the direct term Damascus Steel itself, Kusla ordered her to look for other terms like ‘rare’ ‘ancient’.

Fenesis worked diligently and quickly, handing Kusla one document after another, but these were all unrelated matters like rare town materials, council decisions regarding practices that occurred since the past. There were occasionally things like the rare swords of the officers from the Southern Empire deployed to this place having a rare glint, records that aroused his eager anticipation.

However, none of them was related to Damascus Steel in any way.

Kusl’a withdrew documents after documents from the bookshelf, and the documents next to Fenesis began to pile up.

Neither he nor Fenesis had a proper talk during this time as they were both devoted to their work. This underground warehouse was as silent as a dark, somber graveyard. One might find them intriguing at first, but overlapping documents piled up, the only differences being the authors, the sum of money and the materials listed.

No matter the town or era, the things everyone did remained the same.

One had to wonder if Fenesis’ eyes were feeling fatigued due to the work in the darkness, or that she was starting to get sleepy. From time to time, she would rub her eyes, and then look up at the ceiling.

“If you sleep now, I’m going to stab your earholes with my fingers.”

Upon hearing those words, Fenesis showed no signs of being especially startled.

“I won’t be sleeping.”

Fenesis muttered without much care, and put the new documents to a side.

She pointed her finger at the text, and gently handed it over to Kusla.

She's probably on the wrong track here. Kusla had a glance at it, and was taken aback.

"Hey, this one."

"?"

Fenesis rolled up the parchments and papers once she was done reading them, and was about to move them somewhere else, only to stare at him blankly after he called out.

"The term you wanted is written there..."

Fenesis spoke with not much confidence there, but Kusla again looked at the document, groaning,

"I can't read this."

"Huh?"

"I can't read this."

Kusla handed the paper back, and handed over a wooden board with wax lacquered over it, along with a wooden pen.

"Translate the relevant parts."

"..."

Fenesis looked back and forth between Kusla and the things handed to her, 'haa', and let out a deflated reply.

Then, right when she was about to slowly begin work, she quietly asked,

"You can't read it?"

Kusla answered.

"I can't read it."

"..."

Fenesis looked at Kusla again, and then at the paper.

And once she looked at Kusla again, her eyes looked a little livelier and smug.

“I’m not omnipotent.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

With a delighted look, she wrote the translation on the wooden board. Kusla looked peeved as he watched her, but fact was fact.

Half of this document contained the wrigley words he saw at Wolson’s shop, and the other half was the words he used. He scanned through what he could understand, and the words on the document proved the identities and history of the pilgrims to Gulbetty.

“I really can’t read these words.”

Kusla lamented as he said these words with contempt, and Fenesis stopped, shrank back as she read the words on the document, saying skeptically.

“The words here are harder.”

“Hm?”

How is that possible? Kusla wondered. However, Fenesis continued to translate without any hiccup.

“These are things I want to forget, but unexpectedly, I just keep remembering them.”

She continued as she wrote.

Of course, Kusla knew that Fenesis came from a land far, far away, but these words of familiarity caused Kusla to actually realize for the first time, that she was born in a foreign place.

A distant place where the language, words, customs and other aspects were completely different.

A place only an eccentric man like Wolson would be so devoted to.

She came from such a distant place, and Kusla was utterly intrigued by it.

“Can you talk?”

“Hm?”

“Can you still converse in their language?”

Fenesis lifted her head, and grimaced.

“This is one of the things I want to forget.”

“What?”

“Normally, I’ll carelessly let slip my accent and reveal my bloodline.”

Fenesis appeared to be smiling here, but that probably was a hallucination caused by the candle light.

“The Knights probably saved me because they couldn’t determine from my language where I’m from.”

An accent will often indicate how a person was like in terms of personality, and in some instances, one could get a glimpse of the person’s hometown and income. It was something like Kusla and Weyland’s clothing.

The problem however was that Kusla and Weyland merely wore such clothing out of preferences. but Fenesis did all these not out of her own wishes. If she could choose a peaceful life, she definitely would.

Upon thinking about this, Kusla felt sorry for her.

This topic probably was not an interesting one Fenesis wanted to touch on.

:”My bad.”

Kusla softly muttered, and Fenesis lifted her head in shock.

“I didn’t know you actually knew such words.”

“...”

Fenesis chuckled, and continued writing, saying,

“How is my accent right now?”

Her accent at this point was deeper than before, and surely it was because the matter of her bloodline and hometown meant that she had no room to be stubborn.

It was the equivalent of her saying that ‘this her living in such a place at this point was no different from a corpse that had no value in proecting.

“Perfect.”

Kusla’s answer caused Fenesis to show an obvious smile.

“I tried my best to practise.”

These words felt somber, not because this place was an underground warehouse buried in the darkness. Fenesis was not a simple-minded Princess oblivious to the ways of the world.

“I know where this person is born in.”

Fenesis wrote on the wooden board as she said.

“Hm?”

“I once passed by there...it is a town built in the desert, by a river. The winds there are strong, and when I ate, I feel sand rubbing at me.”

Saying this, she put down the sharp wooden pencil, and handed the wooden board over to Kusla.

Since she did practise this language before, her words were neat and pretty.

“You miss your home?”

Kusla looked down at the wooden board, and asked. Fenesis smiled.

However, she did not look at Kusla, but at somewhere else. She was staring at the scenery in her memories, or possibly the faces of people. In any case,

all that lingered in front of Fenesis in this reality was thick darkness.

“Even if I go back, I don’t have a home.”

Fenesis smiled reluctantly.

“And there aren’t people there who will help me as there are here.”

The table, and even the floor was covered with text she read through.

There were quite a few documents that contained the identities of the people who came from distant lands to reunite with their compatriots, like the thing Fenesis translated. Even if that was not the case, there were only a few who sent letters using their own names. Most documents certainly were signed off by a few people, the power of many, writing in to fight for some authority or requests. Such a group gathered together, forming a town, creating history.

However, these probably were unrelated to Fenesis.

Her eyes were forlorn, and she probably was envious of the craftsmen.

Thus, Kusla immediately said,

“Well, we aren’t as many as those men.”

“?”

“But at the very least, you have me.”

Upon hearing these words, Fenesis ears immediately pricked, and even under the veil, it was obvious.

For Kusla, no matter how he was said to be selfish, a foolish dreamer, how asinine he was, he would pursue his own dreams unwaveringly. It was based on this benchmark that he wanted to keep Fenesis beside him.

In that case, there was nothing for him to be ashamed of, to be blushing about.

He showed no fear as he stared right at Fenesis’ eyes, saying those words.

If he could not do that much at the very least, was there any room for him to talk about a dream his would risk his life for?

Fenesis widened her green eyes, giving a teary, smiling face as she said,
“I’m surprised.”

“Hm?”

“I’m surprised that I’m so happy about a lie...”

While Fenesis said with a teary smile, Kusla calmly answered,

“That isn’t a lie.”

Fenesis probably was not acquainted with such an honest answer. This was something Kusla understood in the prior incident.

She was skeptical as to how she should accept these words, and he could feel her anguish.

“I won’t lie when it comes to my own dreams. As for everything else...well, I’ll lie.”

Kusla added a joke at the end of these words, and it finally caused Fenesis to recover from her thoughts.

She, being so perturbed, seemed to be making a fuss as she said,

“I-I said that I’ll definitely never trust your words.”

“And all I can answer is, fine by that. The truth will come to light one day.”

“...”

Fenesis stared at Kusla for a while, and then gingerly averted her eyes.

It felt as though she was not as obstinate as she was before, and perhaps the magnanimosity she might have in her little chest grew after all

“Y-you’re really—”

Fenesis turned her face aside, her eyes escaping to the documents.

“Sly...”

She shrank back, her body practically deformed.

“Of course. Without being sly, I won’t be able to reach that land of gold.”

Kusla looked down at the text Fenesis translated. As expected, it was a lively blacksmith who came from a land far away to this place, wanting a recommendation to the town guild, and had a compatriot write a guarantee.

“You’re being too honest.”

“...”

Kusla sensed that she was looking at him.

“Are you saying...that you want me to be smarter?”

“So you do know how to read between the lines.”

“...I’ve been told off so many times.”

It was a certainty that she was not talking in terms of an apprentice who was learning.

“You did say that before when you were sent to this workshop alone in the middle of the night, didn’t you?”

The Choir handed Fenesis’ body over to Kusla and Weyland to corner them, and pin a sin upon them.

Fenesis accepted this order, and came to this workshop with two men living in it.

Her existence itself was a curse, and anyone involved with her would be a curse. This plan was successful, occurring without a hitch, and Kusla certainly was cornered.

However, Fenesis back then did not appear to be a victor who cornered her prey.

You're already out of options, so why are you still doing this—such a crumbled smile would fit her back then.

Surely Fenesi's superiors knew that she followed the Choir as she sought a place that would accept her. All they needed to coax her back when she was hesitant was 'Wise up. What is your objective?'

"Well, it's a little wrong to say that I'm sly."

"...?"

Kusla again read the text on the wooden board, held in his hand, and gasped.

He read with bated breath, exhaled, and read it a third time.

It appeared the content was not wrong.

Kusla certainly felt the blood in his belly bleeding.

"It's shrewd."

"Sh, re?"

"Yes. I prioritize and arrange things so that I can move to the target I set, and I follow what I decide upon. This is the realization I need."

Kusla reached his arm forward, and took the original document from Fenesi's hands.

"But I suppose this isn't something a person who read through all kinds of things on the documents and is oozing with a luxurious desire for companions."

Fenesi was startled, and shrank back, again looking devastated.

"Well, as long as your goal hasn't changed, this is enough. The aim to 'not live on lonely' isn't a strange one."

"...?"

"The problem is that this is different from the idea that anything will be fine

as long as you don't live on alone. If you're about to die of starvation, you'll eat a rotten bread, but if you really want to eat a little wheat bread, it is more meaningful to struggle and seek that little wheat bread and die than to eat a rotten bread and die of food poisoning, no?"

Kusla did not think this would change her outlook of life.

However, Kusla was an Alchemist, a line of work where they made the impossible possible.

Looking at Fenesis in such a state, Kusla had the urge to put his hand on her arched back and straighten her back.

"But thinking about that, I'm angry about you."

Kusla gave Fenesis an icy stare, "Hm?" and she immediately gave a skeptical look. His eyes unwavering, he stared at her, and she gave a look as though she wanted to escape, looking flabbergasted.

Kusla remained unabashed as he said,

"You dragged my hand when you came to that workshop, didn't you? You have me, and you're moved by the bonds of the blacksmiths recorded in the document; how does that make me feel?"

Just holding my hand isn't enough for you? Kusla appeared to be kicking up a fuss.

But after hearing his words, it seemed Fenesis was relaxed. Perhaps her mind was not up to speed yet.

Fenesis did all she could, to focus on her target, and she just needed to move forth slowly. a large fire starts with a little flame. At this moment, adding in a lot of fuel would cause a reverse effect.

Kusla shrugged, and reached out to Fenesis whom he accused of being ungrateful. Till this point, she remained dumbfounded.

She probably assumed Kusla was going to hit her, and closed her eyes in fear,

her neck shrank back. However, Kusla merely flicked her cheek with a finger.

“Well, if you do such a thing again next time, I don’t know what I’ll do when I’m all hurt.”

“...Erm, well–”

“But I’ll forgive you for once this time.”

Kusla said with a smile.

“Eh?”

However, one had to wonder what was with the timid expression she showed when he said he would let her go. In any case, the expression she showed was not annoying in any way.

Furthermore, in fact, Kusla’s face would be terrifying.

“What you translated is right on point.”

“Eh?”

“Alchemists need determination and delicacy, but there is something very important too.”

“...?”

“Luck.”

Kusla said as he held the text and the wooden board.

Act 4

“I want to meet a blacksmith called Azu Bahash.”

Kusla shoved the Guild door aside without knocking, and stormed in, finding a man standing in front of the leader’s table. His hair had the flair of a Knight, but his clothing were like a bandit’s.

He stared at Kusla in shock, his face appeared young.

“Where’s Irine?”

Kusla asked, and the young man immediately frowned.

“Huh?”

“I have business with Irine.”

“Who are you? Never met you before.”

He was lanky, but it appeared he was strong.

A blacksmith, huh? Right when Kusla deduced this quietly, a young voice could be heard from the side.

“Dickens.”

Irine spoke.

“Let it rest.”

“But.”

“Let it rest. He’s an Alchemist of the Knights.”

“I”

And with those words, the young man called Dickens showed a tense face.

However, he was of the age where his pride was important to him.

Dickens barely managed to rein in his expression, and glared at Kusla as he scattered to the side.

“Were you rather free over the past two days? Now then? What are you here for?”

“I want to meet the blacksmith called Azu Bahash.”

Kusla said as he approached the duty desk.

Irine appeared to be collating the account books, and a large ledger was laid out in front of her.

“I don’t remember a blacksmith with such a name around here.”

“Really? But it was said there was such a person.”

“...I don’t want to be misunderstood by you, so I’ll go straight to the point. I never thought of hiding anything here. We have a lot of people in this organization, and in our history, there is an awful lot of people moving in and out. So...that Mr Bahash? Anyway, what do you want with that person?”

She did not appear to be playing the fool, and the document’s transaction was dated 14 years ago. Back then, Irine was not of an age when she could speak properly, and probably did not know anything about this town.

“Hm, well, I do have some research related questions to ask.”

“Research? But this is—”

Once Irine said this, Kusla dumped the wooden board with the translated text and the document onto the table. This boorish action of his caused Irine to glare back angrily, and she reluctantly looked at the wooden board and the document. Once she saw that the document contained foreign words, her frown deepened.

But once her eyes were diverted to the wooden board, her expression got a little amusing.

“...Th-this is?”

Irine was trying her best to look calm, but even one who was not an

Alchemist could see that she was faltering. Kusla's mind immediately recalled Wolson's words, but he had his own priorities.

Irine's peaceful life was rather low on Kusla's priorities.

"Do you mind revealing everything now?"

Kusla coldly stated, and Irine finally widened her eyes.

Her eyes quickly turned towards Dickens, and then back at Kusla.

"I am unexpectedly gentlemanly, you know."

No matter what circumstances Kusla would say those words, a feisty lady like Irine would probably wave it off. This however was an exception.

"Dickens."

"Wh-what is it?"

Dickens was a little tentative when faced with such a vague conversation, and he glanced at Irine, backing off.

Irine's eyes were sharp.

Her eyes seemed to show that she realized what was the most important thing, that she would do anything to protect that priority.

"Return to the workshop for today."

"No, but—"

"Go back."

In this town, where the leader was not respected, the blacksmiths would not be sweating hard.

Dickens probably had an eye for the young widow Irine. One had to wonder whether he was captivated by her personality, or allured by the authority that Irine inherited from Brunner.

But he was no fool; he could tell how serious she was at this point.

He went silent, and though he gave a scowl on his lips, “I understand”, he pouted, and glared at Kusla before leaving the Guild building.

Bam, the noise outside the door was cordoned off, and Irine, looking really pale, spoke,

“How did you know about it?”

Now that something pressing was involved, she was not going to play dumb.

Kusla thought of Ings’ request that he keep this a secret from the Guild before the time was ripe. Even he was concerned about his position in the town.

But after a little pondering, Kusla shrugged, and muttered in his heart, whatever,

“About the refining process, how it is like, I was informed of this without missing out on anything. The blacksmiths in this town are really helpful.”

Irine merely frowned, her face not showing too drastic a change.

The only one who assumed that he could conceal this matter was the man himself.

Irine tersely responded,

“Those men only think for their own sakes.”

Ings and the others never cared of the pride of a blacksmith, and never respected the Guild when they told Kusla the matter of Damascus steel. All they cared about was their own profits.

“I’m the same too.”

“Shut up, alchemist!!”

Irine howled by a wolf.

“You’re an existence worse than a man without honor! Stop pretending that you understand!”

Irine was utterly furious, but Kusla merely narrowed his eyes as he let it pass.

“Well, it is true, but I do know something else.”

Saying that, he took a step forward, and put his hand on the wooden board and document on the table.

He stared unflinchingly at Irine.

He was trying to kindly tell her that if she said the wrong things, she would die.

“You’re hiding something about the Damascus Steel, aren’t you? Spill the beans.”

The secret to negotiating was to inform the other party that it was not a negotiating. If he could inform the other party of his loss before the battle began, there was no need for a showdown.

Irine lifted her head and looked at Kusla.

Her eyes looked adamant, but there was no real luster in them.

For even though she was seated in the Guild chairperson’s position, the allies who should be supporting their leader were only caring about themselves.

“I-I—”

“There’s no time. Are you telling me, or not?”

Bam, Kusla stamped.

Irine appeared to be like a girl who was harassed by a drunk in a corner of the street, and shrank back.

“Tell me the method to create Damascus Steel.”

Or else, for that instance. Right at that moment, Irine’s eyes gained some life.

Why? Right what Kusla was feeling startled by this, Irine glared back at Kusla with damning defiance.

“There isn’t such a thing!”

“Oh?”

Kusla immediately reached his arm out to grab Irine by her shirt. He assumed she would be a little intimidated, but even if it was figurative, this person in front of him was the leader of a bunch of stubborn blacksmiths.

The moist eyes remained undaunted as they stared at Kusla.

“Even if you do tear my mouth apart, my heart remains unbroken!”

Such words might seem inappropriate, but it was because of such resolve that this line, uttered to beat the Devil recorded in the Bible was so powerful.

“Ings and the others are probably discussing matters behind my back now. It’s a little late, but I heard about it, that migration matter.”

“...”

“You came here, trying so hard to coerce me, all because of that, didn’t you. Unfortunately for you, the forces heading towards Kazan will be here in a few days.”

“!”

Irine retorted with vengeance.

“It’s too late for you to prepare some gifts for the welcoming party now.”

Kusla knew that she was being deliberate, but his face was frozen still. She was the chairperson of the Crafting Guild after all, and certainly, the information she obtained should be reliable.

There was a few days left.

Just a few days, and the Goddess of Luck would pass by.

Irine gave Kusla a gleeful, victorious face.

“But I didn’t expect you to be so foolish that you’ll go running about because

of such ridiculous rumors from Ings and the others. And I thought you were a decent Alchemist.”

However, if he were to succumb here, Kusla would have been cast off into the wilderness.

He took a deep breath, and, while gnawing back at the shackles of fate, said, “Now then, how do you explain this? With regards to the legendary metal produced at this Guild, I am confident that my secret improvements will be of contribution.”

If this was about Damascus Steel being produced, that news probably would have spread a thousand miles away.

There certainly would be a lot of people introducing themselves, including the comen.

“Who know!?”

Irine answered with a sneer, her eyes staring right at Kusla. That was the expression of one confident that she would never back down, and never needed to.

Kusla knew what sort of reaction would occur if he was to hit her. After they both glared at each other, Kusla let go of her as though he was tossing aside a rag. This was when Irine finally showed a look of suffering, putting her hand on her neck.

Kusla could not help but wonder, what exactly is holding up this lady?

Let’s try threatening her with the thing most precious to her.

“Looks like I made a mistake in my judgement. I wasted my time talking.”

“...?”

“It’ll be faster to hear from the person herself, but if I get the Knights’ authority, I can get the dead to talk. Do you know what I mean? This is the

moment when authority is to be used.”

He stared at Irine’s eyes as he said this.

He would ransack Brunner’s grave, ravage his home, and trample upon all his records and memories.

Irine would remain undaunted even if she was threatened to be stripped naked and tied to a wooden pole at a cross junction, but she was looking utter pale at this moment. Perhaps she knew very well what the Knights’ search would entail.

However, Irine gritted her teeth.

She shivered, appearing to be on the verge of tears, saying,

“However you wish. You can continue to look for this thing that doesn’t exist.”

“...”

“If we have a way to create Damascus Steel, why aren’t we doing so? It’s because such a thing doesn’t exist now! Do you know how foolish an Alchemist and those dolts who don’t understand the honor of a blacksmith look seeking an art that doesn’t exist? Robert will be laughing with me in his grave!”

The distance between Kusla and Irine was enough for the former to land a fist at the latter’s delicate chin.

After pulling her distance from Kusla, Irine said.

“Selfish people like you will never be able to accomplish anything.”

BAM!

And with such a sound, Irine was stupefied. She turned her head aside, looking through the gap between her arms as she shielded her face, and watched Kusla. Kusla remained stoic as he kicked the table hard, and glared

at Irine without a word.

He assumed that that with the materials he had, he would be able to get Irine to confess, but he was too naive.

However, learning that ordinary means would never be able to make her succumb could be considered a gain.

“I shall do as I please then.”

Kusla again kicked the table, took the wooden board and the text, and turned to leave. Irine remained behind him, appearing unable to rein in the fear she kept in check with her tension and agitation, and was weeping.

If he was to turn back, perhaps he would be able to seize an opportunity.

However, Kusla did not think that such a plan would work.

If such a threat was unable to get her to succumb, Kusla could only assume that there was something that could be supporting her. Surely, it was something beyond the natural emotions of wanting to protect a person's honor and memories. Assuming that there was no method to create Damascus Steel, she would have simply laughed it off.

But in that case, she would not have any reason to show such a reason when faced with Fenesis' translation, or the matter of Ings and the others seeking that Damascus Steel.

Something seemed off.

It was like a painting containing a mirage of stairs that would continue to head upstairs.

Or like a paradox of a liar saying that he would only lie.

Kusla wondered as he walked onto the street, and Fenesis was waiting by the door.

She was like an apprentice who was lectured and punished to stand on the

road, shrinking back.

Kusla had her stay at this place, for he knew that the situation would get out of hand. However, it seemed the curse on her body was working, for she probably heard the entire conversation inside.

If she was to lash out, saying, ‘you’re terrible’, he would have to find an excuse for himself again.

Fenesis looked really dejected, as though she was the one being threatened.

“I didn’t hit her.”

“...”

“And that wasn’t for real. That was just a show.”

Kusla shrugged, and even though he said so, Fenesis remained silent.

This Alchemist was probably fiendish enough to use a baby as a sacrifice.

But Kusla felt that even so, Fenesis was still able to understand him calmly.

The reason why Kusla had such a thought after seeing Fenesis was like this, was because he too felt that he was wrong in some way.

“Well I did go overboard in some way, I guess.”

“...”

Fenesis merely pulled her head in silently, and turned her head around, seemingly worried for Irine who was behind the walls.

“Taking a weakness as hostage is a terrible thing.”

“...”

“Especially a person whom someone really endears...”

Rather than a sense of justice, one could say that Fenesis was saying this out of her own experiences.

Kusla put his hand on his forehead, and sighed gently.

“I didn’t really intend to go that much, but she’s way too stubborn. I just tried teaching her a lesson.”

It had been years since Kusla tried to actually defend his actions so vehemently.

And this caused him a renewed sense of impatience. “However–” while tortured by this inexplicable feeling, he tried to forcibly change the topic.

“Her reaction was really strange.”

“...?”

“The document you found is what I’m looking for, no doubt.”

He emphasized on the word ‘you’, and this caused Fenesis some displeasure.

In this situation, even if she was praised, she would not show a smile.

“But there definitely is something supporting Irine there, and that’s why she’s ignoring my threats.”

“...Because she hates you.”

Irine muttered, and Kusla could not help but mutter.

“If it’s someone’s who’s an imbecile, yes. Irine is a wise lady.”

“...”

“There probably is something that allows her to endure this reality.”

Fenesis’ eyes continued to look up from below the veil, and she muttered,

“L-Like Magdala?”

Kusla’s face was immediately devoid of expression, for Fenesis did not simply mention this term she remembered.

It was because she was starting to understand, little but little, the words Kusla was saying.

She was looking tentatively, probably downhearted due to the conversation

Kusla and Irine just had. In fact, she probably was terrified by the words she just boldly said.

Kusla snorted, and had a glance at the bustling street.

Then, he lowered his head and looked at Fenesis, saying,

“Like Magdala it is.”

Fenesis’ expression immediately eased, and she hurriedly turned her face aside.

Did Damascus Steel truly exist? And did Irine truly know the way to create it?

Kusla kept wondering about it, and then sighed,

“Let’s return to the workshop for now.”

Luckily, there existed a second brain in Weyland at the workshop.

Upon seeing Fenesis nod, Kusla immediately strode forth.

They returned, and Weyland was having a late lunch.

However, he had a leg on his chair as he sat, and that was a habit he had only when they were at work.

Despite their return, Weyland did not look back, and seemed to be attentive to something. He seemed to be pondering about something from time to time, writing on a piece of paper next to him.

Kusla got behind Weyland to see what the latter was writing, and found there to be tax records of the town council running this town.

“What are you doing?”

Weyland lifted his head, not because he heard Kusla’s voice, but because he was using a scoop to pick some stewed beef and beans.

He opened his mouth blankly, and seemed to have noticed Kusla standing behind him.

“It’s my share alone~”

“Shut up. So? What are you doing? Trying to check on someone’s fortunes and do some bribing?”

The thick book Weyland was looking at contained the sums the people with properties should be paying. As the taxes were the same, this could be said to be a record of the fortunes of this town.

Of course, there were some who would avoid the council’s intense scrutiny and hide their secret assets. However, this world contained a pair of watching eyes called jealousy. It would be extremely difficult to conceal something in this town, where the residents remained unchanged/

“I’m looking for clues, the method to create Damascus Steel.”

“...?”

Kusla frowned with intrigue, and once he saw what Weyland was copying from the tax books, he felt hammered in the head.

“The birthplaces of the craftsmen!?”

“I noticed it when I was looking for description about Damascus Steel.”

Weyland said after chewing on the beans,

“If the method to create Damascus Steel is known by everyone, there has to be someone creating it, and this will become a place that produces it in masses. In fact, that never happened, and the ones who knew probably used Damascus Steel as a show of their secret expertise when the pilgrimage came about, or maybe Damascus Steel was something that only belongs to people of a certain area. No matter whether they have it, or they know the way to produce it, I’m guessing that these people are the prominent ones in this town. They accomplished, earned their rewards, brought fortunes to their

spouses and relatives. Also, this isn't just an issue on the method itself; there's also a need to see the original materials they could get from their hometowns."

"So in other words, you're checking on where those who know about Damascus Steel come from?"

Kusla assumed that the immigrant blacksmiths would make use of Damascus Steel to migrate, and starting investigating from Irine. However, Weyland started off somewhere else.

Kusla believed that if he put some thought into it, he would ultimately come up with such a way, but he did not know if he could do so immediately.

The shaved time would be the most precious fortune in one's fleeting life.

"How's it going?"

In response to the question, Weyland showed Kusla the paper he wrote on.

"By my estimations, there are 5 places—and the most likely is a place called Clazini."

Brunner, the previous Guild Leader, was born in Clazini, so this conclusion was understandable in some way.

However, such a conclusion could not be deemed that simply.

"Needless to say, that the birthplace of the Guild leader. Also, there's quite a lot of rich people."

The paper had area names on them, with some lines around them. That would probably be the number of people that matched the criteria.

Most of the were concentrated at the North, and some were at the East, with a few at a southwestern island. Unexpectedly however, none of them came from the desert region that produced the mythical Damascus Steel.

"This is actually a Pagan town, and I don't think the blacksmiths are

willingly gathered here, leisurely building the town. The Crusade began not too long ago at that time, and the resistance back then should be strong beyond our imaginations. Leaving aside the Knights and Mercenaries, the blacksmiths were probably gathered in masses here, prepared for a fight to the death. It's not impossible that they just want to monopolize wealth."

"So, naturally, we can kind of think that those people from Clazini are able to accumulate such wealth for some clear reason..."

"Yeah, but well, the swords forged there are famous for being tough and having shiny blades. They had some unique skills that allows them to fuse different metals together, so that alone should be enough to explain why they are so highly valued."

"Forged using Borate?"

"Borates is something rare that we can't obtain, and since we can't practice, it's hard for us when we don't have the necessary skills to process the materials. They probably were really, really serious at their work; that knowledge of the materials and fine skills is enough of a precious fortune."

"Hm."

Kusla pondered in his mind on what he should be doing next.

"But no fire, no smoke. If the fortune is gathered at such a place, that should be enough reason for us to lock in on every person born in Clazini."

"Hm? I suppose from your words that talking to that leader is a no go."

"I was so forceful that I was told off by that Princess over there, but no dice."

Kusla said as he pointed his chin at Fenesis. Though skeptical, she continued to scowl, and angrily shrank her neck back. In response, Kusla chuckled.

"Well, I can believe that you don't have any shred of humanity in you, Kusla, so that means that we can't force her to succumb unless we do something we can't take back. That will be our last resort, isn't it?"

The reason why Fenesis gave a perplexed face was probably because Weyland's casual laugh was such a high dissonance from what he said.

"But this...doesn't feel right."

"Hm?"

Kusla handed over the wooden block of text Fenesis translated and the document that was bound into a book.

"The content on this document did cause Irine to falter, but when asked about the Damascus Steel, she remained stubborn and wouldn't talk. Maybe Brunner was referring to the high quality swords they produced in their hometown; they couldn't produce it with the technology in this town and the materials at hand, so they were probably joking about it, saying that it's Damascus Steel."

"At this point, she wouldn't admit it, right?"

Kusla immediately realized Weyland's retort.

"If they aren't bluffing, I guess it'll be more beneficial for her to admit the truth."

In any case, Kusla did say that he was going to ransack the tomb.

"Even if Damascus Steel does exist, I think there's a reason why she would still say it's a lie."

In that case, was the tale of Damascus Steel true?

Even so, Kusla still had some doubts.

"However, I don't think being honest would hurt Irine in some way. If she can produce Damascus Steel, she'll be proud of it, right?"

Getting involved with that metal would stain the reputation of the townspeople. Such a rumor was utterly ridiculous, but what if that was not a rumor?

“I can’t understand why she won’t admit to it.”

Upon hearing those words, Weyland curled his lips, saying,

“...Yeah. In any case, I don’t think she’s trying to monopolize that Damascus Steel production or something like that.”

“In that case, the reason for her not willing to speak up is that she has something she wants to protect.”

“Yep.”

Weyland looked mildly interested as he stared at the text written in the language of the desert region, before turning to Fenesis.

“What do you think, little Ul?”

“Eh?”

Fenesis was seated in a corner of the room, listening in their conversation out of boredom, looking sluggish.

Once Weyland called out to her for no apparent reason however, her body immediately jerked, and she answered,

“I-I think smelting is the work of the Devil...”

“Hm.”

Weyland snorted, and turned to Kusla.

“Now this really is a straightforward thought, isn’t it~! Even in an Alchemist workshop do we rarely do such a thing, but there are occasionally some people who do dump a Saint’s bones into a furnace.”

Weyland’s stare was met with a mere shrug and shunning, and Kusla said,

“But even so, it doesn’t look like Irine has anything to protect other than honor.”

“...It is a little hard to imagine.”

Weyland scratched his head, his arms folded in front of his chest as he groaned.

“A secret art inherited from the workshop, or something? Doesn’t feel like it...”

“It’s a little troublesome, but I guess we have to investigate the blacksmiths one by one, don’t we? It’s the easiest thing to start with.”

Kusla said, and Fenesis recalled the conversation he had with Irine, watching him with tragic eyes.

And in the face of such eyes, the conscience Kusla never had was starting to ache. At this moment, Weyland interrupted,

“Too bad though~”

“Huh?”

“We’re considered lucky to find out the people born in Clazini, and there’s only one master who knew of the situation back then. His name is Cenail Sophites. According to the reports, he’s at the ripe old age of 72, probably about to die at any given moment.”

It did not matter to Kusla and Weyland whether they would scare him to death, but if he really did die, they would be troubled. They were different from Mercenaries who would raze and pillage as their way of life.

“What about his family?”

“None.”

Kusla showed the face of one who just ate a bitter pill.

“What will you do? You don’t have any human conscience, but an old man without a kin and one step into a coffin won’t be scared of any heartless person, you know~”

“It’ll make things easier if he’s an old man who’s terrified and willing to

live...”

“Better not have any hopes there. Those of the old generation are a different breed altogether. No matter whether they’re rich or poor...they have a Magdala.”

Weyland would only use this term when the most important thing was mentioned.

“Blimey.”

Kusla cursed.

Also, Irine would certainly have reminded that Sophites that the Alchemists were investigating on Damascus Steel. Coercion worked best when it came unexpected; if the other party knew of their arrival, they would be able to counter.

Perhaps it might be better to think of any possible weaknesses.

Kusla thought of this, and suddenly lifted his head.

“What is it~?”

Weyland seemed to have realized something to as he followed Kusla’s stare.

And then, Fenesis, who was being looked at, timidly shrank her head back like a girl cornered by two hooligans.

“When we talk about the sword of Orichalcum, we’ll think about the Princess.”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Weyland cocked an eyebrow, and turned around.

“Then, what about a stubborn old man?”

“A cute granddaughter.”

Typically, they should be attacking head on. Unexpectedly for them however, Irine and Sophites would not tell Kusla and Weyland that information easily.

Of course, if a frontal assault was not going to work, they would threaten, coax, deceive, beg, do anything to achieve their objective.

In any case, first, he should try a direct meeting with Sophites.

Kusla concluded this based on his typical thought process, but the idea to actually use Fenesis was not to be casually said. There were many tales of girls taking down undefeated giants all over the world, for it was a fact.

“...I didn’t expect it to not suit you at all.”

Before putting an ore they had never seen before into a furnace, Alchemists would always check to see if there were any related records. Some ores might explode upon contact with fire, and often, ores would be coagulated together, creating toxic gases.

Kusla and Weyland investigated on the past transaction records, seeing if there was any strange movement in Sophites’ taxes and fortunes. They also contained the Knights, requesting assistance to investigate on the place called Clazini, and had the town council investigate on the person called Sophites.

Also, during this period, they had someone else head to the toilet to prepare some clothing.

A set of clothing for a typical town girl.

“Leaving the ears aside, the hair’s way too white. Maybe it won’t be too obvious in a place like a palace.”

“A swan amongst the ugly ducklings.”

“That isn’t really much of a praise, you know~”

“But I intend to.

Kusla and Weyland had an exchange, and Fenesis stood in front of them, her

head lowered as she endured this shame, her hands grabbing the skirt firmly.

However, Fenesis typically gave a surreal feeling, not simply because her hair was white as Weyland mentioned. The beautiful hair, slender shoulders, and delicate face were all beyond the natural. No matter which part of her body was cut off, Fenesis would stand out in the daily life of this town. This was what Weyland meant by her not really standing out in a palace.

“We can’t have her pretend to be a town girl, so I guess we should have her be a nun, a nun watching over a dying old man. If she acts this role well, it’ll be quite potent...”

“...”

“What is it?”

However, Kusla actually knew why Fenesis was giving such a hurt look. The moment he told her, “Put on the women clothing of this town”, she looked somewhat hopeful.

“Well, whatever, you aren’t suited for a town lady lifestyle after all.”

“!”

She appeared as though someone clawed her sensitive parts.

Weyland shrugged, for he knew what Kusla would say next.

“Your only place of refuge is here. Give up now.”

Kusla expected her to give a dumbfounded look, and inadvertently broke into giggles.

Upon hearing that she was teased again, Fenesis violently undid the ribbons on her hair.

“In-instead of that, please hurry and teach me the smelting of iron.”

“Don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry!”

Even Weyland was giggling blankly along with Kusla, and Fenesis grew increasingly infuriated, her beast ears twitching.

The reason why they wanted Fenesis to learn smelting was that it would be better for her to have some smelting knowledge if she wanted to strike. Humans would have an easier time talking if they had a common interest they could talk about.

“Well I agree that this isn’t for fun. We better hurry; smelting iron takes a lot of time.”

“But in any case, you’ll be waiting until dinner time, right?”

After hearing Weyland’s words, Fenesis, who was still pouting away, appeared as though she was interested.

“That is the time when old people feel most lonely. Attacking the weakness is a basic in hunting.”

To obtain a maximum effect, they should attack at the most opportune moment with the most suitable method. Once they were sure of their target, and knew what to prioritize for their objective, all humans would probably do such a thing.

However, Fenesis undoubtedly sensed something heartless from Kusla’s words.

Kusla did not mind the little tantrum Fenesis was throwing, but it would be a little troublesome if he was hated by her, so he quipped.

“In other words, that level of willingness is a must. It’s all too likely that Sophites isn’t that kind of a weak person.”

“...Is...is that so?”

“If he is, there isn’t a need for such tedious means, and it would have been easier for us.”

“In any case, he never revealed to anyone the secret of Damascus Steel. That

enough is enough for us to determine that he's not an ordinary person."

"Yep. I'm guessing the Knights definitely did probe about Damascus Steel back then. It's not easy to keep a secret from the Knights."

That was not just mere talk.

Fenesis appeared as though she wanted to say something, but probably assumed that if she was to make a rash decision, she would fall into a pit trap, and decided not to voice her opinion.

"In any case, little Ul, you want to learn a little on how to smelt iron so that it'll be easier for you when you need it, right?"

"Hm? Ah, ye-yes."



Upon hearing Weyland's words, Fenesis straightened her back and answered in surprise.

Kusla showed no interest in Weyland's words, but Weyland continued.

"Because this issue requires all of us to contribute~"

Weyland said with an elated look, and Fenesis inadvertently blanked.

"The plan to have you dressed as a town lady isn't meant to be a prank on you. If possible, we'll do whatever we can think of; this is a rule of an Alchemist we abide by, and in other words, we work together."

"Work...together?"

"You're an important force to this workshop~"

A quintessential member to us, he did not forget to add.

Weyland was right, but Kusla was more surprised than Fenesis to hear that.

Since when did he start to show concern for Fenesis? He probably reflected on the teasing he gave her on the previous day.

Weyland carelessly poked at the tender parts in Fenesis' heart, and she could not control herself. The excessive feelings would only cause anyone to remain where they were. Weyland gave a teasing smile, and Fenesis kept her head lowered, her hands pinching the skirt, and she appeared to have forgotten how to blink, her shoulders could be seen quivering.

Lift your head up and show me your face, Kusla wanted to say, but he immediately got himself to calm down. He understood why Weyland was doing this, and not because the latter was teasing Fenesis.

If Damascus Steel truly existed, and Fenesis became the final trump to obtain information from Sophites, what would happen? Weyland had his own concerns, that Kusla might monopolize the information Fenesis obtained. Fenesis would be the one asking for the information, and if the superiors were to ask who did she belong to, Kusla would be the one nominated.

There was such a possibility, so Weyland was trying to mentally wedge into the relationship between Kusla and Fenesis.

Weyland usually could consider of things that would happen later.

If not the case, there was no reason why he would bother with Fenesis. Kusla would do the same if he was in Weyland's shoes.

Alchemists would never use the word 'ally' easily.

In any case, the correct decision would be to not trust anyone.

"Well, smelting iron is troublesome, but fun. Just relax and do it."

Weyland glanced aside at Kusla as he said this.

Fenesis changed her clothes, and exited the room, looking lethargic as she sighed. She probably had some hope to be dressed like a town girl after all. She folded the clothes neatly, put it on the table, and then tied her long hair so that it would be easier for her to do smelting. While doing so, she grabbed a handful of her white hair, staring at it.

"Well, pretty is pretty."

Kusla said as he examined the information he requested from the Knights. Fenesis let go of her long hair, and answered with zeal,

"I don't feel that you're praising me here."

"There was once a rich man of some Guild who did not know fear. He had interest in Alchemists, and he often said this,"

"?"

"He said 'money itself is not a sin, but having too much of it makes it one. Isn't curiosity the same too?' Personally, I feel the same. Alchemists themselves aren't bad; the technology they create do benefit people, and change their lives. The reason why Alchemists are such a taboo however is

that they have a sense of curiosity far beyond normal. Beauty is also such a thing.”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis’ ears twitched as though there were worms resting on them.

“However, it is rather difficult to change something we are born with. If you wish, I can try looking for some dyes, you know?”

“...”

Fenesis again reached for a few strands of hair, grabbing them, giving a fatigues smile.

“You do have some tender moments from time to time. How sly.”

“Weyland taught me that.”

“Taught you what?”

“That after I’m thoroughly hated, once I show a girl my sincerity, she’ll easily crumble.”

Fenesis blinked as she watched Kusla, giving a troubled smile.

“Is it really okay to explain the trick to this?”

“The tails of the tails of the coin is the head. This might not be the case for humans.”

“...”

“Sometimes, there’s something behind that something behind.”

“...That’s, very convincing.”

Kusla nodded, and Fenesis gave a tired smile as she cringed back.

“More importantly—”

This time, it was not Kusla, but Fenesis who spoke.

“Am I really able to be of help?”

The smile vanished from her face.

Like water sprayed about onto a desert, the vanish immediately dissipated from her face.

“Of course.”

“...”

“To be precise, in some situations.”

Kusla assumed she would be dejected because of this, but she let out a long sigh of relief.

“You’re probably scared that people feel that you can do it, and that you’ll fail.”

Kusla teasingly pointed out, and Fenesis gently answered, Yes”.

“I won’t get angry just because you fail, but this doesn’t mean I don’t have any hopes. I’m not Weyland, but I’m your ally.”

Fenesis’ ears pricked, and at that instant, she appeared to be on the verge of tears.

As Weyland meddled excessively, Kusla had to tighten the relationship he had with Fenesis. If he was to say such careful words, and the results were too idealistic, he would feel a little guilty somewhat. He had a tough time determining if Fenesis had sense of reliance when it came to him, or that she had feelings for him, but those definitely were her true feelings.

“And if I make a request to someone else, I definitely have to think think that there is a chance it can fail. I won’t be so stubborn like you that I will pine all my bets on one person. For us, wagering like that—”

“U-understood.”

Is that a counterattack? Perhaps it was more like a silent sobbing.

Kusla could not help but chuckle, “I guess.” and said,

“So, it’s fine that you just think of this as learning Weyland’s smelting methods. We don’t know how stubborn Sophites will be. Some overly stubborn craftsmen do get agitated the moment they see a little girl.”

“...”

“It is true. He has no kin, and this can be said to be evidence of his stubbornness. If we really can’t do something, trying incite his feelings. Do what you can, and don’t neglect your preparations.”

Fenesis looked serious, and somewhat skeptical as she nodded.

“But this is when I’m serious as I say this.”

Kusla put aside his reading materials, saying,

“Weyland is a wolf when he’s smelting. It’s to be expected that you’ll be hit and yelled at.”

“...!”

“You won’t cry for nothing, right?”

“I won’t!”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis guaranteed as she pricked her ears.

After a quick, simple dinner, “Now then” Kusla stood up.

The noise of the waterwheel dragging the bellows and ores being smashed could be heard downstairs. As he had yet to hear any growls, it appeared Fenesis was doing unexpectedly well.

In fact, Fenesis would surely follow the steps, and that alone would make her outstanding.

While that stubbornness of hers was truly danger, it could be easily settled by grabbing her neck and wringing it out. Thus, even Kusla was worried about Weyland’s plans. However, Kusla had his own aims, and in his heart, Fenesis

was an existence of equal standing to a sword of Orichalcum.

If he had to choose one, surely he would choose Fenesis, who was within reach.

In other words, if he was to weigh between Kazan and having Fenesis on a scale, surely he would choose Fenesis, and then think of ways to get to Kazan.

Thus, Kusla was worried that Weyland would do some irreversible things all for his aim to get to Kazan. Perhaps Weyland wanted Kusla to realize this, to form a restraint on Kusla, and that Kusla could not simply manipulate Fenesis and monopolize beneficial information for himself.

There is still a back behind that back; Kusla could not help but lament.

It was pointless to think about it.

At the very least, Weyland was a smart man, and he probably had no interest in anything other than his own dreams.

That fact alone should be enough.

Kusla took a deep breath, and shook aside the random thoughts in his mind. No matter how one might sugarcoat it, what would happen next was not something pleasant. Even Kusla was uneasy about attacking someone who was in the midst of having dinner.

But if this was to be balanced against his own aims on the scale, it was obvious which side the scale would tilt to. In that case, all he could do was to charge on. This was the only way he would gain meaning in life.

Though he might not need to use it, Kusla inspected the dagger hanging at his waist, and looked mentally prepared.

Once his preparations were done, Kusla was about to leave the workshop.

However, he stopped abruptly, for there were footsteps outside the door.

Typically, he would first observe the situation.

But now that he was standing right in front of the door, he intended to strike first and catch the other party off guard.

“I”

And then, both parties gasped.

Of course, the significance of their reactions differed.

The other man was covered in soot, the sleeves rolled up to reveal a pair of dirty hands, and even the soiled shoes after a day’s worth of work was not changed. His face and ears were red, his eyes a little listless. All that indicated that he just raced over from his workshop.

However, Kusla wordlessly stared back at Ings, shoved the latter out of the workshop, and walked out.

He turned his back on Ings as he locked the door, and turned around, asking, “What do you want?”

Upon hearing these words, Ings seemed to have recovered, giving an intriguing look of one almost in tears and rage, and he lashed at Kusla,

“I-I heard that you went to the Guild! You threatened Irine!? That, that, you m-mentioned that, didn’t you!? Y-you also mentioned about me?”

“...”

Kusla stared back at Ings coldly,

Ings seemed to have obtained his answer from the silence.

“Y-you said it...wh-why!? How do you expect me to have a footing in the Guild!? If news of me asking an Alchemist for help gets out there, I won’t be able to stand as a blacksmith!”

There was no one around in sight, but he actually yelled out loud on the road. Perhaps he had lost his marbles after all.

Perhaps that young man Dickens blurted out about the matter with Irine.

In any case, Kusla stared at Ings as though he was witnessing something filthy, and shrugged,

“I never did promise you that I wouldn’t say anything to Irine, didn’t I?”

“Ah, that...”

Ings was left speechless at that instant, and he probably felt humiliated, for his face was flushed/

He was one of the famous people in this town, an impressive master at the workshop. However, he never did left the town, and his authority as a master was surely inherited from his highly esteemed father, so he did not know the hard work his predecessor had to put in to earn it. even so, he had a dream to head to the new world, a realization to callously intrude the dream of the eccentric Wolson, or a recklessless to rudely request an Alchemist for help.

However, how could this man yelling in front of Kusla be so foolish? Even the latter was a little lost on what to do.

The reason was that for this.

No matter the common sense, they never had the realization that they had to risk their lives for it.

Restraint.

“Is that all?”

“...!...”

“I’m busy.”

Kusla glared back at Ings, now like a sheep, and strode right past him.

Due to the toil of his work every day, the master could be said to be a walking, hulking mass of muscle. If he was to hit Kusla, even if the latter wielded his dagger, the outcome was obvious. Ings himself would have

known it.

However, he did not move, and merely remained there, clenching his fists.

He did not know what would happen to him in this town once he got into a squabble with an Alchemist.

If he was to hurt an Alchemist, the Knights would come out.

Self-preservation. Fitting in. Honor. Order.

Kusla spat on the road.

Such a man was useless, hoping to pursue his dreams, but would not trample over such things.

Kusla walked on without looking back.

And Ings showed no intent to give chase.

Kusla took a deep breath, and walked into the evening crowd, passing by the people heading home after work and preparing for the final work for the day. His mind recalled the information the Knights gathered about Sophites.

Cenail Sophites, 72 years old, and like Brunner, his wife died before he came to Gulbetty. Perhaps back then, it was a risky thing to head to the new world, and anyone with a family would have practically no chances of going. Even if he did arrive 20 years ago, he was in his fifties back then. Perhaps he devoted himself to work so much soon after arriving in this town that by the time he realized, he found himself to be too old, and never took in a new wife.

It was unexpected that Sophites was a genial man. Even so, there were several times he was arrested by the guards in the middle of the night for indulging in alcohol. In those cases however, he was let go after a few words, so his alcohol addiction was probably not too serious.

He had long retired, and the authority he had as a master for opening a workshop appeared to have been auctioned off as he had no kin. The profits

earned were mostly donated to the town council and the Guild, but the income he raked in despite the donation was still massive enough that his fortunes could be listed in the tax records. It was said that he never did interfere with the town or Guild affairs, and continued living leisurely in his home, the workshop.

A genial man who accomplished much, a crucial figure of the town.

Done it all, huh? Kusla showed a smile on his lips as he marveled quietly. This old man was like a Saint, hiding a certain secret, and Kusla could not help but feel rattled, would he be able to obtain that secret?

Unlike that fool Ings, Sophites might appear demure, but there was a presence of an ancient lurking in him.

The street, passing through the blacksmiths' area, was called the Rust Street; it was narrow, and the buildings on both sides were clustered, the passers-by having the refreshed looks of people who worked hard. Each household looked plain, and the fragrance of dinner lingering from every single one.

It would require great courage to barge into another person's daily life.

If that was to be called courage, surely Fenesis would be raging again. Sophites could continue to have dinner as many times as he wanted, but such a good chance in life would only occur once.

There was no reason for Kusla to feel apologetic.

"Mr Sophites."

He knocked on the door, and called out the name.

The passing blacksmiths stared at Kusla in surprise, and then quickly hurried on.

Kusla knocked again, and right when he was about to call out the name, he sensed movement behind the door.

"Who is that?"

It was a genial voice, as the reports indicated.

“I’m from the Knights.”

Kusla’s choice of speech was coarse, for surely Irine would have badmouthed Kusla; rather than start off with the pleasantries and then be upfront, it would be prudent for him to be upfront instead to show his sincerity.

“Oh? What do you want with a retired old man?”

“In any case, open up the door.”

Kusla sounded a little anxious, and after a few seconds, “I understand” Sophites replied, and opened the door.

Standing behind the door is an old man who was like a hammer, worn out after many years of use.

Perhaps that impression was due to his bald head, white moustache, and slender body.

He was not tall.

But even so, he remained undaunted in the face of Kusla’s physique. One might say that he had a tenderness of one who could break into a smile immediately.

“Oh my.”

“I supposed you have heard that I’m the Alchemist, Kusla?”

“...Well, I did. Irine was really fuming.”

Sophites’ expression remained genial as he mentioned it, like an old man watching his grandson bicker with his granddaughter-in-law.

“Mind letting me in?”

Sophites’ frail shoulders formed an ideal shape after a long time of use, and there was not too much muscle mass. He shrugged like a young man, and moved aside as he opened the door wide. At that moment, a fragrance could

be scented upon from within.

“Having dinner, huh?”

“Why yes, I was about to get started.”

Kusla entered, and found the room to be similar to the firm’s warehouse.

However, there were all kinds of ores and tools. The room was messy, and it was obvious that he did not use the items. This lonely man was merely awaiting the grave after retirement, and certainly it was the right choice to strike during dinner. He must have been lonely every day.

“Well, it’s rare for you to have dinner. Isn’t it bad if it gets cold? I’ll chat with you.”

“...The Alchemists nowadays are really kind, no?”

Sophites sounded chirpy as he answered. Perhaps he would have been delighted to have a visitor, no matter who it was. He had to support himself off something as he walked, and clearly his legs were almost gone.

While Kusla watched Sophites from behind, he suddenly had a thought in his mind.

Was his life accomplished? Did he have no regrets left? Did he feel there was any meaning to live on?

Kusla had some form of interest for a man who pursued his dreams, and was about to meet the end of his life.

However, this lifeless looking back probably had nothing to look forward to.

Kusla probably thought of this as he entered the room, probably affected by the atmosphere of the dim room.

“You really came right on time.”

“...”

Sophites quickly turned around, and smiled, saying,

“I just so happened to prepare for two. May we have dinner together?”



Laid out on the little table there was dinner for two.

Surely Sophites knew that Kusla would visit him during dinner.

The smile on Kusla's face was contorted.

He could not let himself get careless against this old man.

"...I guess it is to be expected of a prominent member of this town."

"Hoho. Well, as an Alchemist's opponent, Irine did have a lot of burden on her, I guess. It has been a while since I last saw her cry."

Sophites quickly sat at a chair, beckoning with his hand for Kusla to sit opposite. Though the latter was being led on, he became poised instead.

The atmosphere was indicating to him that this opponent was a rational one.

Kusla believed firmly that Sophites would easily divulge what he knew as long as Kusla took Irine as a hostage.

But because of that fact alone, Kusla was willing to change his mind and talk it out.

Sophites had something worth respecting.

That was something akin to the thing Alchemists sought.

Kusla sat down, and faced the dinner.

"I guess this is to be expected of a blacksmith capable of having his name recorded in the tax books. Quail for dinner, I suppose?"

"It is for someone who made Irine cry after all, and it has been a while since I had a guest. I had to work harder."

He said as he took an urn, and poured wine into Kusla's mug.

It was quality, clear and free of impurities.

"Now then."

Sophites said with a satisfied look.

“Let us give thanks to God, and begin our dinner.”

The dinner was so fragrant, one could assume Sophites had a nearby inn prepare it, but in fact, it appeared that Sophites actually went to the market to buy the ingredients and cook it. The pot with the stew of river fish and root vegetables also contained quail that was roasted with onions and vanilla grass. Sophites’s hands skilfully diced the quail with a knife, and most importantly, he still had a set of good teeth able to gnash the meat and soft bones. It appeared his need to support himself off anything was merely an act.

Kusla increasingly realized the craftiness, and did not mind as he continued to dine on the pricey quail meat.

“Nice appetite you have.”

Most of the food was wiped out, and dinner came to an end.

Sophites looked delighted as he took a gulp of wine.

“But importantly, not gluttonous.”

“...”

Kusla looked down at the plate on the table again, and shrugged.

It was a simple meal, but so delicious that he was mesmerized.

“So, for a blacksmith’s standard, what do you think of this?”

“You have still yet to talk about that.”

He appeared to be smiling. That might be his true face.

No, he was actually smiling.

Seated in front of Kusla was a blacksmith who participated in the building of this town with his own skills, with strident conditions as compared to this point.

Surely, when he was unretired, he was utterly feared by his apprentices.

Kusla put the last piece of quail meat into the mouth, swallowed a gulp of wine, and finally heaved a sigh.

“I do apologize for making Irine cry.”

“Well, that is because she is a headstrong girl. I knew at first sight that she’ll be easily crushed by anyone who really knows how to hurt a human heart.”

“Well, I am the hated Interest ‘Kusla’, one that doesn’t understand a human heart.”

“At the very least, you know what you are. Knowing that alone in this world makes you a terrifying weapon.”

Sophites said, and filled Kusla’s mug again.

“The matter about migration seems to be frothing away.”

Frothing.

This choice of word indicated the manner this man viewed things.

Kusla took a gulp of wine, saying,

“I want to be one of the first migrants to Kazan.”

“Kazan...I see. Kazan, is it? On a side note, will our Ings and the others be chosen?”

He said those words as he looked into the wine in his vessel.

“...Huh.”

Kusla merely shrugged.

He never intended to help Ings and the others. While Ings did provide a great, beneficial information on Damascus Steel that would have warranted a favor, the merchants and townspeople are the ones who would put their favors and debts on a balance; for Alchemists, there was no such place for that.

If Kusla was to have him, would Kusla himself earn any benefit?

He took some wine; Sophites merely cackled.

“How ruthless you are.”

And while Sophites laughed, Kusla put an elbow on the table, leaning forward.

“Now then, do you know anything about the smelting of Damascus Steel?”

“Not at all.”

Sophites did not lift his head.

He was not intimidated, merely enjoying something, it seemed.

“Irine answered the same thing. Surely you know something related to Damascus Steel. Since both of you stubbornly refuse to say, there has to be some sort of reason that could swear you into secrecy. What is it?”

Perhaps it was some forbidden witchcraft methods the world should not know of after all?

And also, it remained a mystery why Damascus Steel was not mass produced. If the Guild could produce it freely, there would be no need for them to appease the Knights. This however was not the case. Did they pick up some metal chunks that were in another localized area?

Sophites kept staring at the wine in the mug.

After a while, he lifted his head.

“There are only two people who know of this method in the world—”

He stared at Kusla right in the eyes, saying adamantly.

“Irine and me.”

Kusla desperately withheld himself from the other party’s powerful stare and his own surprise.

“Mind not being so relaxed about it? If I threaten you and say that I’ll strip Irine naked and throw her to the mercenaries’ dorms, you’ll succumb, no?”

Sophites narrowed his eyes.

And the smiling face still remained.

“This name ‘Interest’ seemed to be a fake.”

“Because I have respect for you.”

Sophites smiled, but it was a false one.

“How interesting, these words.”

“That’s because I feel you’re different from the ordinary blacksmiths. You have something very similar to us.”

Sophites maintained the fake smile, and slowly turned his face away.

“All this old man has are past memories. Perhaps, they are called...dreams, or something.”

Saying that, he sighed, and muttered,

“I cannot tell you that directly, for it can fulfill our wishes. It is different for Irine however.”

Irine’s dream?

Kusla was a little startled, and said,

“Irine said that those with dreams will never become good blacksmiths.”

“I”

At that moment, for the first time, Sophites showed a stunned look.

It was for an instance, but Kusla sensed firmly that Sophites had some strong emotions he was unable to repress.

“Irine actually said that?”

“You being so shocked is already shocking in itself. Is it because she understood what the order of a town is like?”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Sophites looked embittered.

It was certainly not a coincidence that he took a gulp of wine at that instance.

“That...foolish girl...”

What he said next certainly felt like something a stubborn master would say.

“No, the foolish one was Robert. That imbecile died without saying the most important matter, and that’s why things ended up this way. An utter imbecile who let a little trust be overestimated.”

Though his voice was not loud, the tone was shrill. Such choice of words was probably befitting his actual personality.

Kusla stared at Sophites without flinching, not sparing any changes to the latter’s face, so attentive he forgot how to breathe.

“But...if it didn’t touch out like this, I would have pretended not to notice anything and leave this world silently...those that brought changes to this town are the ones who remained aloof to everything else.”

In this town of tight-knitted human relationships, there were also those who had issues they could not settle on their own.

Sophites’ stared seemed to be looking through Kusla.

His eyes were giving off a dull, silver glint only those who experienced all kinds of hardships would have.

“I have a request.”

“Request?”

“If you find that method to create that Damascus Steel you refer to, and be chosen as one of the pilgrims, I do wish that you take Irine along as you leave this town.”

At this moment, not even Kusla could maintain a stoic facade.

Certainly, Irine was unhappy about her role as the Guild leader.

But because of this, such a request to Kusla was too farfetched.

“...I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I just said that that girl has a dream, no?”

Sophites had a meaningful glint in his eyes as he looked at Kusla.

And the latter gave a look of one calling a fool a fool, his eyebrows frowning as he said.

“That is not what I mean. Do you know what you just said? We’re running around, trying to get the skills so that we can be chosen to move to Kazan, and you hid this from us. Now you’re telling me that if I know that, take Irine away? You’re like a snake biting its own tail. Also, if you want it, can’t you make that Damascus Steel and offer it to the Knights?”

Sophites listened to Kusla’s words without flinching, his white eyebrows the only thing twitching slightly, lesser than a breeze bristle.

“Just as humans have endearing love for their tools—”

“Huh?”

“There are such thoughts in the skills.”

Sophites averted his eyes, appearing to be looking afar, and sighed deeply.

With a sigh, he said the words that remained sealed in his heart.

“I have not wilted to the point where I can say, as long as the outcome is the same, the process doesn’t matter. There are all kinds of stories on the journeys to pursue one’s dreams, and because there are many stories, life is meaningful, no?”

No? Rather than ponder how to refute after hearing these words, Kusla thought of his probing into Thomas Blanket’s methods.

Whenever a target is set, and hard work was put in to venture towards that goal, surely there would be stories along the way.

More importantly, what was the one, strongest wish he had for Fenesis? That would be what he was considering.

Keep a few eye on the target.

In other words, walk down the path he yearned for.

“This isn’t something that can be easily understood and not something where you only need to accept the result. At the same time, I feel that girl should start on a new story. That girl was imprisoned in her past because of Robert, and has too strong a sense of responsibility. That imbecile Robert doesn’t know that some people will get bound down by some little wishes.”

Sophites said, letting out a sear sigh.

As expected, they did not get married due to lust, or to greed of personal wealth. Irine was fascinated by Robert Brunner’s skills, and for a blacksmith, there was not anything greater than this.

Thus, Irine was entrusted with this. Robert confided a ‘little’ wish to her—to protect this thing the blacksmiths Robert and Sophites built up, and were proud of.

“Right now, I’m on my last legs. All I can do is to tell tales about turning lead into gold.”

“...Alchemists can’t turn lead into gold.”

“But you can extract gold from lead, no? I shall leave Irine’s matter to you; if you can’t handle such a trivial matter, it will be troubling for me.”

Sophites was a man who came from the era of intense wars, and built this town with his own skills.

Like what Kusla would do to Fenesis, Sophites’ unreasonable choice of words left Kusla speechless.

“Also, even if you can find that secret of Damascus Steel yourself, whether or not you can obtain that metal is still a mystery.”

“What?”

“It is that sort of thing. This isn’t a metal that can be obtained by simply smelting. You need special knowledge and skills to smelt that metal. I do know the method, but my body can’t do it. Thus, you will have to request Irine in the end.”

Sophites stared at Kusla.

The deep-colored eyes appeared such that they could see the color of the soul.

“Move Irine’s heart, and take that girl away.”

Surely it was a strange request.

However, Kusla could not refuse. Of course, it was not because of the lure of being a pilgrim to Kazan.

It was because what Sophites said throbbed that little thing in his heart, that thing that was akin to a core of an Alchemist.

“I have a little worry—”

“What?”

“Irine is stubborn.”

“That won’t be an issue.”

“How do you know? Or at least, mind explaining?”

Sophites gave a lively smile,

“That girl is mesmerized with highly intricate techniques...”

“...”

“Out of her obsession for metal.”

You have heard of such a line before, have you not? The sly ex-blacksmith's eyes were giving a cheeky glint as he alluded to this.

“That girl herself probably wanted to migrate to Kazan, and may have thought that Damascus Steel is a way to fulfill this dream. It is a matter of whether she will cooperate, and that skill is basically that kind...”

Sophites' words caused Kusla to inadvertently retort,

“I'm not a Clergyman that guides the sheep.”

“You may think of God as a dream, and the Bible as the skill books. Also, why do Alchemists risk their lives?”

Kusla did not respond. Perhaps Sophites was more akin to being an Alchemist that Kusla was at that moment.

“So then, please.”

Sophites said as he beamed.

Act 5

“Such ridiculous words again~”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Weyland, who had a cloth wrapped around his head and his muscles exposed, chimed in cheerfully, holding the mug of air-chilled beer in hand.

“I do think that we’ll be able to think of something if we put our efforts into it. But...I feel that there’s something to be respected about him.”

“Ohoho? I get what you’re saying...well, we will have to convince little Irine after all, huh? It’ll be all over when she remains unmoved even after some sudden violence. That fatal blow has to be left for the end, you see. However, what is it about the feelings in the skills Sophites talked about?”

Saying that, Weyland stared at the ceiling blankly, and Fenesis was in front of the furnace, frantically dumping wood and coal, removing the thing known as slag. She was sweating profusely, probably because she could not expose her muscles like Weyland could, and there was a bottle of water and some salt put next to her. She seemed to be quite a quick learner.

“I don’t know. Quite a few skills required people to risk their lives to develop them, but can you understand the technician’s feelings for those skills?”

“Normally speaking, this is impossible. This world is way too cruel~”

Weyland’s callous looking eyes were not indicating a joke, and it appeared he was cursing at God. When Kusla reviewed the superb skills left behind by the former owner of this workshop, Thomas Blanket, he was fascinated by it as though it was the construct of the universe. However, such a fascination was caused by the endless, repeated number of tests and results Thomas kept seeking.

For example, Kusla would never associate Cupellation with the great Alchemists of the past, and also the refining process for zinc. Outstanding

skills and techniques will spread all over the world, but the issue of ‘who went through such hard work to produce such techniques’ were scantily remembered.

The only ones who would lament the cruel world would only sink into the world of prayers.

“Damn it.”

They had a large lead guiding them along, but they just could not think of a breakthrough.

Kusla cussed, and Weyland pondered silently.

Sensing a stare on him, Kusla turned behind to see a weary Fenesis drinking some water, staring at them.

“...How’s the purification of iron going?”

Kusla asked, and Fenesis glanced aside at the furnace, nodding stoically.

And from her demeanour, Kusla could see a clear objective.

“Well, you’re sweating so much I thought you’re crying.”

“!”

Fenesis hurriedly wiped her eyes with her hands.

Upon seeing that, Kusla looked over at Weyland.

“You didn’t beat her up, did you?”

“No way. I can’t possibly do such a thing~”

Weyland giggled. Perhaps he thought it would be too much of a hassle to use his hands, and kicked her instead.

“Have you extracted a little iron yet?”

“I got these at first, but they haven’t cooled.”

“All these? How black...”

The iron was put in a stone vessel, the color akin to iron granules that were melted and shaped; Weyland placed a hand at his chin, saying,

“Even though I told her to remove any slag that suddenly appears, she doesn’t know why that is the right thing to do, you know~? Luckily, this place has a collection of ores from all kinds of places. I do think that it’ll be better if she’s to repeat the same processes a few times, and understand the results formed by different ores.”

“Hm.”

“But.”

Weyland continued,

“Looking at what you said, I guess little Ul here doesn’t have a chance to show up now.”

“...”

Kusla glanced aside at Fenesis while the latter pricked her ears and worked, and he shrugged.

Having learned that she would not be of help this time, it appeared there was a strange feeling growing in her heart.

“Better to learn the techniques as quickly as possible. Also, if the fire continues to burn in the furnace, you’ll get better results.”

“Hm? Well, I guess.”

Fenesis answered lifelessly.

“But, I guess it’s fun to look for something that we can’t imagine.”

The crimson flames were upon Weyland’s face, and shadows were all over the place, giving the smile some real presence.

“What will you do now, Kusla?”

“...”

In the face of that question, Kusla wordlessly cocked his head.

Fenesis was standing at right where he was looking at.

“My name is ‘Interest’ (Kusla). I do not understand the notion of ‘thoughts’, and there is nothing I can do with that young lady down there now.”

Kusla’s words were blatantly honest, but it was better for Fenesis to actually understand clearly beforehand. Weyland bared his teeth, cackled, and slowly drifted to the furnace. Fenesis obviously overheard their conversation, and was looking extremely tense, but Weyland went by her, poured all his beer into the furnace, and tapped her head with the now-emptied mug.

“The temperature was too high.”

“Y-yes.”

“Before answering me, get to the waterwheel.”

“Yes!”

Fenesis went outside as per Weyland’s orders, and the latter watched her leave, before beaming away as he looked at Kusla.

“You wanted to do that, didn’t you, Kusla?”

“Well, it’s true that if things got serious, I’ll want to do everything.”

Weyland’s laughing so hard his shoulders were huffing, and while watching Fenesis undo the connecting shaft, he said,

“You’re really bad at lying.”

“Becuase I never ever lie to myself.”

Kusla retorted, and Weyland exhaled, before reaching his arm for his shirt placed on the work desk.

“Alright, I’m going out to hunt for some nightbirds.”

“Huh?”

“If there are feelings in those techniques, there has to be a reason for that.”

“...”

Kusla watched Weyland practically mutter to himself, and suddenly realized,

“Are you going to visit a blacksmith’s—”

“A workshop furnace will be ruined if you don’t heat it up once in a while.”

Having said that, he teetered up the stairs.

It seemed he was acquainted with some blacksmith’s widow. Instances like Irine were an extreme, but it was not uncommon for a blacksmith and his wife to have a significant age difference. Weyland realized that there might be someone from the Clazini area who had knowledge on creating Damascus Steel, and perhaps, he might be able to obtain some information from a blacksmith’s widow.

But this certainly was Weyland’s modus operandi, and Kusla remained unfazed.

Also, Weyland firmly believed that Fenesis had lost her chance to obtain any particularly important information, and thus discarded her.

Such a refreshingly straightforward Alchemist.

Fenesis returned after adjusting the bellows, and upon seeing that Weyland was gone, she involuntarily felt mystified.

Kusla shrugged, saying,

“He said he has nothing to teach you now.”

Fenesis nearly bought it for an instance, but after a smile, she tilted her head, saying,

“I don’t believe your words.”

“What will you do? Continue to refine the remaining bits? I do think the

results will be interesting.”

“I’ll do it.”

Fenesis adamantly replied.

“I’ll watch you. Carry on.”

“Got it.”

Fenesis nodded seriously; perhaps she did her work in a prim and proper manner when she was back at the Monastery.

Kusla watched her work, and simply answered,

“If you fail, I’m going to beat you up.”

Fenesis was taken aback, and stopped what she was going. However, when she turned back to look at Kusla, she gave a lively smile.

“I said that I’m not going to believe what you say.”

“Hmph!”

Fenesis beamed away as she replied, and Kusla snorted. Then, Fenesis continued to work on the iron and fire.

Kusla watched her work from the chair beside the work desk, pondering.

The techniques that were researched and developed would certainly not contain any feelings of the ones who created them, but the process of developing it certainly would be intimately bonded with these people, and surely, the myriad of emotions by the creator would be contained in it. Kusla knew that, but he also felt that it was impossible to deduce from a certain technique what happened in the process.

However, Kusla was scowling away not because the issue posed was unreasonably difficult, but because he had a firm belief somewhere within his heart that Sophites would not tell him anything that was remotely impossible to begin with. If Kusla was to deduce this with his heart, he should be able to

deduce what Sophites was saying. Thus, he continued to rack his head furiously.

If not for the request to take Irine away, Kusla would have simply dismissed this as some simple smockscreen. Even Fenesis could tell that Irine was suffering in that Guild.

In that case, the thing that bound Irine to that Guild would be as what Sophites implied, a pasting word from Robert before he died. Perhaps Irine really agreed to that request that was entrusted to her 'I shall leave the rest to you', even if she really wanted to learn smelting techniques, head to Kazan, or such.

Sophites was hoping for Kusla to correct Irine's tilted thinking.

And also, the technique to create Damascus Steel was deeply rooted to this.

Kusla had a restless feeling, that he almost understood, but did not. He had a feeling that as long as he thought of something, everything else would be revealed.

In fact, leaving aside the relationship between Sophites, Irine, and the Damascus Steel technique, what Kusla did not understand was the technique used to smelt Damascus Steel. Sophites explained everything else, and Kusla did not feel that the old man was lying in this aspect.

Also, in terms of smeling, it was implausible that it would be so ostentatious.

He did not think there was a need for some blood from a legendery hero, a spell left behind by some ancient archmage, or such, so there should only be a few answers to it. That, a sudden blank in his supposed expertise, was the source of his restlessness.

The techniques in his memories were all parched and tasteless, unemotional.

This technique had much emotion in it—and so important one would never succumb no matter how he was threatened.

“...”

The flame flickered, and Kusla slowly lifted his head.

He felt a little amiss, and noticed that he fell asleep without realizing it.

The bellows roared along with the waterwheel like a demon, pumping air in, and it echoed along with the flames cackling in the high temperatures of the coal. Kusla stood up from the chair, and with a loud groan, stretched his back.

Fenesis was seated on a large box containing coal, in front of a furnace, putting the poker off the floor like it was a staff, her hands on it, her chin resting on the back of her hands. Her back was slouched, her ears were slumped, and her head was tilted, as though she was an old lady worn out after a mere stroll. It seemed she was nodding off, tired in front of the flickering flames. Actually, she might actually be asleep.

However, her eyes were slightly opened, and her blurred eyes seemed to spy something beyond the flickering flames.

Suddenly, sparks blared after the coal cracked, and this little motion finally caused Fenesis to notice Kusla, as she frantically got up.

“I-I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Oho?”

Kusla snorted, shrugged, and looked into the furnace.

“Slag.”

“Hm, ah...huh?”

Fenesis hurriedly got up, and due to the sudden change in center of gravity, she tumbled over, her petite body about to fall forward. Having anticipated this, Kusla gently held her in his hands.

“When you’re tired, don’t stand up immediately. You’ll feel giddy.

Sometimes, you'll fall forward to the scorching furnace."

"..."

Fenesis' consciousness probably went up the chimney and drifted into the sky or something, but she immediately responded, wanting to grab onto something. Her eyes were bleary, and her little hands were grabbing onto Kusla's arms. Her mouth was not opened, and her breathing erratic; it was obvious that it was a subconscious action. Kusla could imagine that such a thing definitely happened in Fenesis' life before, and let out a languid sigh.

Weary from wandering and escaping, she probably grabbed onto something while her consciousness was faded.

Kusla could understand.

He let Fenesis sit on the floor slowly. Her hands were placed on her knees, and she collapsed limply onto the floor. Kusla then took the poker from her hands.

"Have a little rest."

Saying that, he raised the poker and prodded at the coal in the furnace. After adjusting the temperature, he took a long scoop placed by the furnace, and proceeded to scoop out the slag. IT seemed there was no glass or lead in the furnace, but there was some gold or silver impurities common in ores.

While Kusla did all kinds of adjustments, Fenesis remained seated limply on the floor, staring into the furnace blankly.

She would fall asleep if it got quiet, so Kusla said,

"The crux to refining ores is whether you can keep everything in such a high temperature over such a long time."

Kusla said as he handed the poker over to Fenesis.

The latter timidly received it, put it on the floor as though it was a staff, and slowly got up.

“No matter how unfamiliar an apprentice is, anyone can refine iron to a certain level of purity by adding enough coal and making sure the bellows are powerful enough.

It was unknown if Fenesis was paying attention to Kusla’s explanation, for her eyes were closed, and her fingertips were rubbing between her eyes. She then picked up the bottle placed on the work desk, and drank some water.

“When there is so much impurities in crude iron, if you want want a purity level, you first need to have the knowledge and techniques. Of course, the process will differ accordingly based on what you want to use this iron for.”

Having said that, Fenesis looked a little gaudy, and pulled her distance from Kusla.

“For example, the hardness, or malleability of iron required to make nails, swords and rasps are completely different. If the iron is too hard, it will be so brittle it will snap easily when you hit it. If it is too soft, it can’t be used to create tools. It is difficult to master the fire control. For swords, after killing two people, the blood and fats sticking onto it will cause the sword to lose its function as a sword. Thus, swords have to be sharp, and at the same time, able to be used as a blunt weapon, to be able to smash a person’s head in along with the helmet.”

Kusla’s explanation caused Fenesis to show a face of extreme disgust.

He gave her a mocking sneer, and she cringed her neck in, answering with a taunting look,

“Rasps can be used to wallop the heads of some dullwitted apprentices, but the main purpose is to file things. Thus, the only requirement for the iron is that it is hard. There are times where it becomes too brittle that it snaps once it drops onto the floor.”

Kusla pointed his chin at the furnace.

“Add some coal. The furnace is cooling.”

“Yes, yes.”

Fenesis was about to scamper over, but she immediately gave up.”

She slowly tottered over, took some coal out from the wooden box, and added it into the fire.

“Well, refining iron has always been something like this. It’s because of this that I don’t understand at all.”

“...?”

Fenesis peeked at Kusla.

“I have been reflecting on everything that happened, a technique that is filled with feelings.”

Irine obstinate refusal; Sophites’ words.

As Weyland said, this world was cruel and heartless, never once remembering the feelings of anyone.

“Refining and smelting itself is a lonely job. Techniques are techniques, just a mean for the objective. I;m guessing that it isn’t a feeling that isn’t so simple that it’s obvious. If there is something that can be conveyed, all that is is probably hard work that makes people go ‘ahh, this will be tough on us.”

Fenesis averted her eyes, seemingly pondering; her beast ears were twitching, and this probably was the same as Kusla’s habit to stroke his chin whenever the latter was thinking.

“But this is just the hard work when it comes to refining iron. Not feelings.”

Kusla cupped his hands behind his head, and leaned on the wall.

“Or maybe it is because I am ‘Interest’ (Kusla) that I don’t understand?”

Fenesis muttered in a pouting manner, his breath blowing off his fringe.

Fenesis stared at Kusla blankly, “erm” and softly whispered,

Kusla looked back at her, and she immediately shrank back, lowering her head.

He let out a sigh, and asked, “Now what?”

“I-I only saw the text.”

She was shivering as she answered, and she continued on tentatively,

“I’m not angry. I just don’t understand what you are saying. What are you referring to?”

“...”

Fenesis pulled her chin back in, and shrank back, her eyes looking up.

She involuntarily reached her arms out.

“The thoughts...in the technique?”

Fenesis noted, unconfident in her words.

“I read the papers you gathered and brought from the Guild...”

“Okay?”

Kusla looked down at the work desk.

“About that?”

“Yes. Actually, I asked Mr Weyland a few questions.”

Kusla’s face nearly became sullen the moment he heard Fenesis add the suffix ‘Mister’ to Weyland. Of course, as he was ‘interested’ in human form, his face remained stoic throughout.

“Hm?”

“I asked about refining on a large scale, turning an entire hill into a furnace, something like that.”

Alchemists like Kusla would never be able to do this.

However, what was Fenesis trying to get at?

Kusla was simply curious about this, and he looked over at Fenesis. The latter was fiddling the hem of her hemp-made work clothes with her fingers, and, finally determined, she said,

“I think it’s really something amazing.”

“Yeah.”

Kusla wanted to continue on, and after a pause, he said,

“Yeah, it really is something amazing.”

“...”

Fenesis looked somewhat skeptical as she stared back.

Those eyes of hers were clearly implying that he never did understand what she was saying.

“Erm, that is not what I was saying.”

“Hm?”

“I-I was talking about the time when we were refining zinc.”

Fenesis’ words increasingly aroused Kusla’s skepticism.

“?”

As Kusla frowned, Fenesis could not help but grimace.

It seemed she felt awkward about what she was thinking, but at this point, dithering would only cause one feel jumpy, so she said,

“I had fun, refining zinc.”

“Yes...you were literally spacing out back then.”

“I-I wasn’t!”

“Hm? Ahh, Sorry for the little teasing. So, what are you getting at?”

“Erm...we-well-well, back then, but...I...”

One had to wonder whether she was feeling confused, for her voice trailed off at the end.

However, Kusla got the feeling that she was simply lacking in confidence.

Fenesis had something she wanted to say.

Sighing, Kusla stomped.

“Talk.”

Fenesis’ body trembled, but her eyes were not daunted as they looked at Kusla.

“...I-I feel—”

“Feel what?”

“Th-that.”

“That?”

“That it is really wonderful for everyone to complete something together.”

Fenesis’ eyes were green, her pretty hair was white, and even her beast ears had white fur upon them.

She had no home, no hometown, and spent her entire life fleeing from persecution, drifting around until this got to this place.

Perhaps it was because of this, that everything at this place was so new to her, that she was able to figure out the truth from something Kusla took for granted.

“After asking the question, I began to think when refining. I-I don’t know what method that lady at the Guild knows, but if that is something that can’t be completed alone, something that can only be done by working together with people important to her, I won’t tell you even if I’m violently treated.”

“Aren’t you telling that to me now?”

Kusla chuckled, but his eyes remained on Fenesis throughout.

And Fenesis met him in the eyes, saying,

“I-I...learned a lot of things over here, and I’m really happy about this. If I’m to recall them one day, these will definitely be wonderful memories to me.”

“Don’t say that now.”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis went quiet.

However, Kusla felt an inexplicable throbbing in his heart.

For Fenesis’ viewpoint was one he never thought of.

And if he was to follow this trail of thought, there would appear a proof that would convince him that it was the truth.

Completing something with everyone was truly something wonderful.

Everyone? Completing? Something?

What did Irine say to Kusla?

Selfish people like you will never be able to accomplish anything.

“Because, I...”

Kusla ignored the last of Fenesis’ words that were akin to a flickering flame, and silently pondered.

It was the right direction. Certainly there was no doubt about it.

He was confident.

That was the crux linking Sophites’ words to Irine’s thoughts. If Stibnite had to be added to increase the malleability of iron, there had to be some additive added so that the iron would be strong no matter how it was hit. In any case, such a technique implicated somebody really important to Irine, and also involved honor, the attribute, most valued in town.

In that case, what exactly was such a technique? At the very least, he could understand that this wasn't some major work that could be completed alone. As Sophites had said, he himself could not do it, but Irine could create that Damascus Steel.

Kusla recalled all the techniques that were researched.

There had to be people helping, and yet, this was a technique that could be completed alone.

If it was not something that was really physical, or something that required a lot of work.

What was left was...

The materials.

The original materials required to make a certain something.

"Erm..."

Right when Fenesi was about to speak up,

Kusla felt something flash in his mind.

"Ahh, I see. So that's how it is."

He completely ignored Fenesi, and strode across the workshop in large steps.

He stood in front of the vessel placed by the furnace.

Contained inside it was the iron extracted from ores of different kinds, from all kinds of places. ores that an Alchemist workshop would surely have.

He recalled the unique attributes of Damascus Steel. What kind of features were there? What kind of metal was it?

He turned his head around, and Fenesi shrank back in shock.

Taking a deep breath, he declared,

“Mystery solved.”

“I”

Fenesis widened her eyes, and Kusla said.

“Those guys once had their own Magdala too.”

He looked outside the window.

It was dark, real dark, yet there was the color of dawn there.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Eh?”

“I’m going to the Guild now.”

“Eh, erm, it’s still night...”

“Blacksmiths have early mornings, and even when they can’t see their own outstretched fingers, it’s morning. Of course, it won’t be too early.”

“I’m going too!”

Fenesis adamantly answered.

“There’s still some iron left, you know?”

Kusla asked. That stumped her, but she immediately pulled herself together.

“Th-this is an issue of priorities.”

“Well put.”

Kusla chuckled, and glanced aside at the furnace. It was probably fine to leave it as it was.

Also, he had no intention of remaining there for long. Surely he would force Irine to succumb this time.

“Now then, hurry up and get changed.”

“Yes, understood.”

“And also—”

“?”

While Fenesis stopped, Kusla shrugged and said,

“I’ll reward you. Think of whatever you want—other than dolls.”

“...”

Fenesis did not reply, merely showing a half-smile of disgust on her face, and dashed up the stairs.

Watching her leave, Kusla’s mind was filled with ironic thoughts.

Was he really an alchemist who did not comprehend the human heart, only moving forward towards his objective?

Maybe I should be turning in my name ‘Kusla’ now. He thought.

The outside was terrifyingly cold.

The stars were like snowflakes, still flickering in the night sky. Simply sniffing at the cold air alone would render anyone sober.

Kusla and Fenesis passed through what remained a dark alley, heading towards the Guild building.

Fenesis actually had a little rest while doing her refining work, but she did not actually recover much. Her legs gave out a few times, and she stumbled forward, certainly not because the road was too dark.

Kusla reached his hand out, and after some hesitation, Fenesis grabbed his hand.

Her hands were a little coarse, probably due to the refining work she had to do that caused blisters on her hands.

“I thought of the past.”

“...Eh?”

Fenesis felt that something was amiss, and gave such a look at Kusla.

Kusla walked on, muttering,

“I remember the days back then, when I was serving my apprenticeship with Weyland.”

“...Back...then...?”

“Back then, I was living my life as how it is right now, living in perpetual darkness. All that back then was for something you might frown upon after hearing.”

“...”

Fenesis stared at Kusla, looking perplexed as to why the latter would mention such a thing now.

“However, this is the key to solving this.”

Kusla said as he lifted Fenesis hand. Her hand was so white, the color contrast between them was striking.

“I’ve been working alone in the workshop for a very long time, so I kept forgetting.”

The white breath gently vanished behind them, and the commonplace things faded away like the breath.

Suddenly, the tranquility was broken as they arrived at the street. Unlike the alley from before, the sky was already brightened, even though the morning sun was yet to raise, and the streets were lighted up. Despite this, there were torches lit along the streets, and toiling hard are the merchants preparing for the markets, and the fishermen at their boats, getting into positions.

Kusla let go of Fenesis’ hand, for he probably felt that there was no need to lead her anymore, and at the same time, he felt that an Alchemist should not

be holding a young girl's hand while walking down the street.

Thinking about this alone was a refreshing feeling to him. If he was not like this, perhaps he would have realized the answer from the hints Sophites provided.

Kusla hummed in his heart as he walked on, and soon, they arrived at the Guild house.

After some thought, Kusla stopped in his tracks, "Hm?" while Fenesis remained skeptical, he led her to a side alley.

"Er-erm?"

Fenesis was giving an uneasy look, probably due to a gaudy misunderstanding as she was led to this place devoid of people. Kusla invariably had the impulse to tease her, but for the time being, he held it in.

"First, we'll have a look at the situation. It'll be tough to do this if there are still Masters around. You don't want this to get out of hand, don't you?"

"..."

In the end, Kusla could not help himself as he teased her. Fenesis immediately scowled, wanting to chide Kusla, but was left with no enthusiasm as she sighed in a lethargic manner.

All that were left were those green eyes giving a pouting vibe,

"You really are an Alchemist."

"...I feel that there is something in those words. What is it?"

In the face of Kusla's question, Fenesis sighed, and said,

"Like a child."

Fenesis actually mentioned those words

However, Kusla merely watched the Guild entrance, "Un." and nodded away.

At that moment, there was a yawning man, dressed in blacksmith clothes entering the Guild. Once the doors opened, he greeted the people inside, and after some laughter, the doors were closed. The masters would gather at the Guild every morning like this to socialize with their peers, or to settle work matters.

If one looked closely, he might find a few Guilds being the same.

Such was the scenery of a morning in town, and surely, it would be the same every day in the future.

“You’ll understand once you have a little look.”

Kusla quickly said, and Fenesis naturally did not look really exhilarated.

Instead, she sighed blankly, and let out a soft sneeze.

“Need me to get you some wine? Looks like we’ll have to keep waiting for a while.”

Fenesis rubbed her hands, and shook her head,

“I’ll fall asleep after drinking.”

“...Yes, and you’ll go on a drunken stupor.”

“...”

Fenesis looked visibly annoyed, turning her head with disdain.

However, as she did so, she said something that took Kusla by surprise.

“Maybe, once I get drunk, I might talk incessantly.”

“Hm?”

Kusla looked dumbfounded. Such words definitely should not be said during supervision.

“What do you mean?”

“What you just said,”

“...Don’t talk like that.”

“You aren’t teasing me here, right?”

She butted back.

Kusla appeared to be on the verge of bursting into laughter.

“Now then, what do you want to say? Keep talking.”

Kusla hated having his emotions exposed, so he turned his eyes towards the Guild. The master just now appeared to be having a nap, but it seemed it would take a little while longer before they could end the morning meetings.

“You told me to think of what I wanted back then.”

“Well, yes, I did. What do you want? That viewpoint is worth praising, as amazing as turning copper into brass using zinc.”

The latter half of the praise sounded so deliberate.

Kusla heard the sound of clothes rubbing behind him, and it seemed Fenesis was twitching her body in displeasure.

“Please listen to me seriously.”

“I’m listening.”

Kusla said, and Fenesis let out a fatigued sigh.

Perhaps she was thinking about that it would be futile for her to say anything to this Alchemist.

“Can I really have what I want?”

Kusla could not help but look back, for he could hear something abnormal in Fenesis’ voice.

Fenesis’ green eyes were staring at Kusla intently.

“You said it before. I don’t know what I really want.”

“...”

Kusla glanced at the Guild once, before looking back at Fenesis again.

His body tilted over, indicating that he was really paying attention.

“So, I’ve been thinking all this while.”

“Was that why you tripped over?”

“...Sorry.”

It was at such moments where she could be astoundingly honest.

But she again said,

“Can I really make any wish?”

Even in this darkness, Fenesis was so white nobody could simply laugh it off.

Kusla stared at Fenesis.

And then, he nodded,

“Find out the thing you really desire most. When you do that, you’ll naturally find all kinds of different scenes. We call this Magdala. In this world that is like lead, that is the only beacon that keeps us going forward.”

“Like precious metals?”

One had to wonder if she spent time to find this term on a book, or that she heard from Weyland.

In any case, Fenesis really did adapt well to the workshop.

“Yes, but, of course, there are things that I can’t do. For example, I can’t get you a large gemstone. Also...if you say that you want complete freedom, I’ll be worried about that. You understand?”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis widened her eyes slightly, looking a little dumbfounded.

“That isn’t it.”

“Oh...well, I won’t stop you from wishing for what you want. No matter how

ridiculous or otherworldly it is, I won't stop you. I'll only do that when I find that isn't what you're really wishing for. If you say something like hoping for the Choir's recognition back then, I'll stop you."

Fenesis cringed back unhappily.

Kusla then chuckled, saying,

"Also, us Alchemists can smell each other out to see if we're of the same breed."

Kusla bent over, trying to bring his face to the back of Fenesis' neck. The latter was probably used to this, for she quickly evaded it, and pushed Kusla off.

"Let's do this then!"

Kusla straightened himself, and looked at Fenesis.

It did not appear that Fenesis intended to lie or say any random thoughts she just so happened to think of, and she did not appear to be putting up a front to defend herself. She looked really tense, her face frozen, her breathing light and finicky. The ears under the veil were pricking, clearly showing how nervous she was.

She was serious.

For the first time in her life, Fenesis might have thought of something she really wanted.

"Just a question, mind telling me what that wish is?"

Kusla asked, and for some reason, Fenesis shrank back.

Then, she shook her head like a little child.

"I-I'll tell you when the time is right."

It might be a little too much of a fuss, but perhaps she was really embarrassed after all.

Kusla did not tease her however, and did not find her to be childish.

It might be something awkward to ignore the surrounding stares and desire something from the bottom of the heart.

Kusla recalled his own situation being the same.

“That’s fine.”

“...”

“That’s the only thing I won’t lie about.”

Kusla said, and chuckled.

Fenesis gave Kusla a blank stare, and frantically shook her head.

I wasn’t bluffed. Fenesis might be whispering this to herself. Kusla was not peeved about this, and after a little chuckle, he watched the Guild again.

Fenesis had a wish.

What exactly was it? He wondered.

“Mind giving me a clue?”

Kusla asked, and heard some light breathing from her.

“I came here, following my priorities.”

Kusla looked back, and though Fenesis appeared to be shriveling slightly, her eyes were fixated on him.

“You can be quite a person if you aren’t afraid.”

Chuckling, Kusla nodded, and though Fenesis seemed miffed about it, you might be right about it, she seemed to have admitted it.

Such an interesting fellow.

However, Kusla immediately shut his heart with a smile on his face.

“They’re out.”

As he muttered, the doors opened in front of him, and the masters walked out.

Some were greeting each other, some were yawning, but almost all were headed to the blacksmith street. The others heading elsewhere probably had to purchase materials, or had other matters to attend to.

Kusla calmly counted the people.

The crowd quick dissipated.

The last to exit was Irine.

She waved goodbye to the masters on both sides, cheering on the men who obviously looked sleepy.

However, there were only twelve who came out.

So did that mean there were a few more masters?

Amongst the masters who left, Ings was not one of them, and neither were the people who were with him on that day.

There would be a few who would not attend, either because they were out of town, or that they did not want to dine with a cruel widow like Irine.

Wolson said that Irine was not that kind of lady.

Kusla too felt the same.

But even so, he would not do anything that would defy his beliefs.

The last of the masters vanished into crowd before him, and Irine, who kept waving till that point, suddenly put her hand down, let out a long sigh, and turned to return to the Guild.

A forlorn sigh.

“Now then, let’s go.”

Kusla said, and exited the alley.

Fenesis remained speechless as she followed him.

Once the doors opened, Irine was left defenseless as she cleared the dishes, looking back at Kusla and Weyland.

It appeared that she had yet to comprehend just who was standing there.

But the moment she reacted, she did not lash out or anything.

The glow vanished from her eyes, and she continued to clean up the cutlery silently. It appeared that she decided to ignore them.

“Aren’t you going to say ‘aren’t you really free for 3 straight days’?”

“Aren’t you really free for 3 straight days?”

Irine retorted without looking at Kusla, and brought the cutlery into the inner room.

The cutlery were all porcelain, as to be expected of a rich Guild.

Kusla snorted, pulled out a chair from a table that was not in use, and sat on it.

This one table was not used at all.

Surely it was like this every day.

However, each table was polished so brightly, and they were tended to as though the room was packed with people.

When seen up close, it might appear to be a touching scene of hard work.

However, for those who remained skeptical that her marriage was for conniving reasons, that hard work was just a show.

“Looks like there are quite a lot of tidy tables.”

When the opponent remained aloof, one had to hit her right where it hurt.

Irine returned, and for a moment, stopped her hands; it appeared it really hurt

hurt.

“...There are quite a few masters eating with their apprentices recently.”

“Hm?”

Kusla deliberately raised his tone, and Irine again stopped her hands.

She looked dazed as she looked elsewhere, and after several seconds, she looked at Kusla again.

“If you want me to hate you, beat me, why don’t you? If you’re lucky, you can get some of God’s forgiveness from that Sister over there, huh? Learn from the Pagans and do whatever you want!”

Irine’s eyes were as searing as her hair color as she lashed out at Kusla.

And Kusla took Irine’s lashing head on, slowly closing his eyes.

Fenesis looked really uneasy, but it appeared she understood that she could not interrupt.

Kusla lightly inhaled, and opened his eyes.

“This is a mean I’ll only use at the last moment, but I have a promise with Mr Sophites.”

“...”

“I had dinner with him yesterday. He treated me to quail meat.”

Kusla stood up, and Irine looked wary as she shriveled.

However, Kusla did not mind her reaction, instead moving towards a table where the dishes were not cleared from.

There was still scraps of sausages on the table, and Kusla suddenly reached out for one, picked it up, and ate it.

“Such a fine sausage. To be expected of the Guild.”

“...What did you discuss with grand–Master Sophites?”

Kusla remained so calm and poised, and Irine put on a furious facade to hide the uneasiness as she said this, for she feared that Kusla exacted violence on Sophites.

“Well, this certainly is delicious, but anyone will want to eat food they made, and not the leftovers from others. That was what we were discussing about.

Kusla sat on the table.

“You did tell off Ings and the others, didn’t you?”

“What are—”

Irine wanted to let out an instinctively growl, only to stop midway through.

She gulped, suppressing her raging emotions, and eked her voice,

“What do you mean by that?”

“It is cruel of you to lambast them for their wishes to head to the New World.”

Irine gasped, and her face was flushed due to anger,

“Someone who doesn’t understand anything about honor has no right to talk about this.”

“Maybe. I’m not a blacksmith. But, I do think that I understand a person’s dreams better than anyone else.”

Upon hearing Kusla’s words, Irine averted her eyes for an instant.

Kusla closed his eyes again

And then, while his eyes remained closed, he said,

“Stop fooling yourself.”

Irine stopped.

Kusla opened his eyes, and he saw Irine being a bird eyed by a hunting dog.

“I do agree that Ings and the others don’t know anything about honor.

However, the reason why you feel this way definitely isn't because they want to leave this town."

Irine's mouth was slightly opened, but she immediately closed it again.

Surely she wanted to ask the basis of those words,

"I have a basis for this. If you feel that Ings and the others hoping to leave is damaging to honor, you won't be able to protect Robert and Sophites and the others."

"I"

"They were also immigrants into this town, and to them, they had to leave their hometowns, so that would mean they are traitors, no? Of course, maybe the reason they left is that there are too many blacksmiths, or that there was something they found unpalatable. But, what is the reason behind that? Isn't living on a miry life without a purpose also a reason why it is unpalatable? Why can you reprove them for such a reason."

Kusla said this, but in fact, most of the people in town would say, wanting to venture into the turbulent new world was not a reason to be impatient, and that they should stay buckled to Order instead.

He knew.

However, Alchemists were a bunch of people who would abandon such common sense, and zealously pursue their dreams, not letting go of it.

Humans would typically have such tendencies.

And if there was nothing to protect, it would be easier to move on.

Robert and Sophites' wives died before them.

"No then, what do you think the honor they 'lack' is about? Try talking to Ings for a while, and you'll understand. What they lack isn't honor, but restraint."

“...”

Irine's face froze, and she slowly pulled her back in.

However, she did not refute.

“Those people really have no reservations. You can tell from their eyes that are not exposed to the outside world; they have tunnel vision, only able to see what is in front of them. They thought of Wolson's words, and came interrogating you without holding back. When they failed, they went on to request an Alchemist. I don't deny that they should do whatever they could to achieve their aims, but there has to be a priority to this. Only by doing things in steps will they be able to go further, to be able to anchor themselves onto this world, and to continue forward without stopping. We should be respecting those people for that.”

Kusla said, and paused,

“Those people don't have an aim, no standards to bind their actions to. Also—”

Kusla stood on the table, and pointed his chin,

“You don't have one right now.”

“Wha-what are you saying right now?”

Irine wanted to back away, but her body knocked into a table.

Kusla shrugged, and sighed.

He shook his head in reluctance, probably deliberately.

“But unlike the young lady seated there, you still have a slightly functioning brain.”

“...!?”

Irine warily shielded herself, but even she could not hide the uneasiness in her heart as she watched Fenesis, who was teased by Kusla. At this moment,

looking away would be akin to admitting defeat.

“You’re smart, you know your own circumstances, and you know where to go to. However, you know that you lack something decisive, and that’s why you kept going for second best instead.”

Kusla stepped forward, and Irine could only shrivel.

However, it appeared she did not think of going around the table.

Perhaps she subconsciously realized that she had nowhere to go to.

“Sophites said that our dreams can be fulfilled, but yours can’t. That is why you didn’t tell me the method to create Damascus Steel.”

“...”

“And currently, the method to smelt Damascus...no, that old man said that is was a creation. He said that there are only two people who knows how to create it. One of them is old, unable to do it. In other words, the only one I can request this from is you.”

“...”

Irine remained speechless.

However, Kusla did not mind as he carried on,

“Also, he said something strange back then. If we discover the secret to Damascus Steel and get chosen as part of the first batch of migrants, I’m to take Irine along—that means you, and leave this town. This really is a strange proposition.”

Kusla continued forward, and Irine could not stop him from closing in.

At this point, the distance between them was just a matter of two people’s heights.

“But now I understand the reason why he said that. The problem here isn’t about getting the answers by following the clues, but to understand a little

and let it all clear up, like a chain. In most situations, it is because someone misunderstood a certain something that caused matters to become like this. For example...”

Kusla finally took a step forward, and looked down on her as he appeared to be covering her. Irine reached her hand out to shove Kusla.

However, Kusla grabbed her hand, and forcefully shoved it onto her neck, pushing her down.

“What you really desire here,”

The table shook, and Irine appeared to be grabbing her own neck.

“What you really desire definitely isn’t something like this...”



He said while starting into Irine's eyes.

Irine continued to suffer without looking away from Kusla, let alone fighting back. She appeared to be tormented by illness, a patient waiting for release.

“What you desire is really something simple, but this isn't something you can solve yourself. What you desire is to complete something with someone else.”

Kusla said, and let go.

“In other words, something that requires the knowledge and strengths of others.”

“...”

“This is the secret of Damascus Steel, I suppose.”

Kusla got up, and looked at Fenesis.

It seemed Fenesis wanted to say something, but she clenched her fists, and held back.

Kusla sighed, and while Irine relaxed as she laid prone on the table, facing up, he said to her,

“They gathered the skills, tools, materials, blacksmiths and everything else together for the sake of brainstorming a way to be chosen as the migrants, and created the legendary metal. This is something that can only happen by gathering people, who would never work together, to accomplish. This is the reason why you froze when I asked about how to create Damascus Steel, no? Damascus Steel is something that can't be smelted.”

The legendary metal was a creation of blacksmiths, unable to live on as they were, gathering together to find an exit.

The fact that this place did not become a major production field for Damascus Steel itself vindicated Kusla's view. The metal Robert and the

others created was probably only similar to Damascus Steel, and not the real one. Anything fabled, or lost in history would have counterfeits, and Damascus Steel was no exception. Kusla did see wandering conmen selling dyed metals.

However, Robert and the others had no choice but to do this. In other words, they had no intention of create a counterfeit, just their prides as blacksmiths, and created an intricate replica to fool the Knights, only to never work on it again. There was a key difference between them and conmen, that they had clear standards, judging what should be more valuable to them.

As almost had ever seen Damascus Steel before, they probably faced a huge temptation to earn lots of money by creating it over and over again.

But they never did, and basically, it was a plan they had when they were at their wits end. If they made it once, the Guild that valued honor highly would forgive them. Irine understood the feelings of Robert and the other seniors more than anyone else, and because she felt the same, she probably did not want anyone else to use this for personal profit.

That was why she insisted on taking second best.

She took on the role of being Guild leader, and made everyone work hard together. This was a little different from her original wish, but the fact that everyone worked hard together remained the same.

Certainly, the reason why Irine was deemed a conniving widow was because everyone saw that she was lying to herself. Just like what Kusla said to Fenesis, people could vaguely smell if someone did not do anything on their own will. This was not exactly a specialty Alchemists had. Irine knew nobody would visit, yet she cleaned the Guild so nicely, it was deliberate. One could tell that she was fooling herself.

Insistence could kill.

However, why was it that Irine remained so insistent on completing

something with someone else? If one was to deduce the answer, he would find that there was a reason for that insistence. Kusla understood such a person so well.

“You’re an orphan, aren’t you?”

Kusla said to Irine, and then, he heard Fenesis let out a startled voice.

Irine did not answer.

“I don’t know what circumstances you were in back in your hometown...but I can imagine that you came to this town alone, wanting to rely on your compatriots, and you came to Robert’s place uninvited, and worked hard there. Maybe Robert remarried after so many years because of lust, as the people say, but he also wanted to entrust the Guild to you. Those born in this town, those blacksmiths that are like bred sheep, will never be able to protect what he created.”

Sophites berated Robert for making such a trivial request, for it would shackle certain people.

“It seemed he also told you to be wary of Alchemists.”

“...”

Irine covered her face with both hands, and sobbing could be heard.

With a pained look on her face, Fenesis approached.

But Kusla kicked Irine, perhaps trying to wake her up.

“Now then...”

“...”

Irine timidly stared at Kusla, and one could see the tear-stained face through the gaps between her fingers.

Kusla curled his lips into a smirk, saying,

“So, are you going to create that Damascus Steel?”

“...”

“We want to go to the land of Magdala no matter what.”

One had to wonder how long Kusla and Irine remained silent.

However, Irine moved her arms, covering her eyes, and when they remained visible again, he could see something raging and burning inside.

“I have...a question...”

Irine asked as she faced up, hiccupping from time to time, probably a habit of hers whenever she cried.

“Grandpa...what did he say, about me?”

Kusla snorted, backed off, and turned around.

“Foolish girl.”

Leaving these words behind, he pointed his chin at Fenesis.

Fenesis looked worried for Irine, but it seemed she had realized something as she obediently teetered to the Guild doors, where Kusla was.

Having said all he had to, Kusla had already set the firestarters, and enough coal and wood.

All that was needed was for the fire to blame, metal to ooze.

But when Kusla placed his hand on the door, Fenesis placed hers on the bellows.

“Erm.”

Her voice was so soft it was unbecoming of this occasion.

But it appeared Irine heard it.

“What it is?”

“...”

Fenesis hesitated, but after that, she finally summoned some courage, saying.
“There is still happiness in this world...”

Even if the materials were the same, the methods differed, and what may be obtained will be different.

Even though Irine did not know about Fenesis, she could sense something from the latter’s words.

“It is written in the Bible—”

“...?”

Irine watched Fenesis.

“Ask and it will be given to you.”

One had to wonder if Irine smiled after hearing those words.

But Fenesis turned to look at Kusla, and like a little girl pretending to be an adult, that solemn expression of hers seem to imply, my advice can help too.

Kusla tilted his head, and opened the door.

The frigid air and the bustling atmosphere of the town struck him immediately, but Kusla narrowed his eyes not simply because of this.

There were two people standing in the opposite corner of the street.

There was Weyland, warming himself with a flickering flame, and Sophites, holding a cane as he watched Kusla.

“Looks like your plan to strike first failed.”

Kusla said after crossing the street, and Weyland sneered.

“This is an assist~”

It was likely Weyland realized the fake Damascus Steel when he watched Fenesis smelt the iron.

But Weyland did not know Irine, so he certainly sensed that it was easier to

talk to Sophites than Irine. In other words, he knew that if Kusla had the same conclusion, he would surely head to Irine.

Thus, he visited Sophites, timed the moment when Kusla and Fenesis would be able to convince Irine, and brought Sophites along.

They were thinking for their own sakes, yet their actions were unexpectedly similar.

Even during their apprenticeship, this was the case.

And some things were simply long forgotten.

“Well, what about Irine?”

Sophites said some antiquated words.

Kusla said,

“She’s not a foolish girl.”

“...Lads.”

Sophites chuckled, tapped Kusla’s leg with his cane, and crossed the street before entering the Guild.

Once he saw Irine, he would be able to determine how violently she was treated. There was no need to worry however; a blacksmith’s violence in the workshop could be way beyond this.

“Now then, I’m going back to the workshop to sleep~”

Weyland said with a huge yawn, and then asked, “What do you two intend to do~”

His inclusion of Fenesis was his way of indicating that he would not be bothering Fenesis anymore.

Kusla glanced at Fenesis beside him, answering,

“All things come to those who wait.”

Weyland shrugged, giving a wry smile.

Epilogue

Kusla's face was quite a masterpiece when he reported the findings on Damascus Steel to Autris of the the Knights' Baggage Corps.

Certainly, the higher ups decreed that the uncouth Alchemists were to be bogged down, but they unexpected showed quite an achievement.

However, Kusla only reported to Autris after receiving a reply to the express message he submitted to the town Azami's Crest was at.

Of course, though the Knights were in charge of protecting the townsfolk, they were simply surrounded by the Pagans.

Certainly, if they were informed that a mythical metal could be offered to forge a precious sword, they would not ignore it.

Why would a King want a rare, dull sword? For that was not used for slashing. Having it as an ornament was significant in itself.

“Really feels like bread and yeast left to rest.”

After many months, Irine was at the blaring furnace again, and Kusla stood in front of it, muttering blankly. She was swinging the hammer down on the metal placed on the anvil. Also present were Weyland, Sophites and Fenesis.

She hammered at the red, scorching metal block, stretched it, repeated the process on countless kinds of metals, overlapped them, and welded them together with refined skills. It seemed the metal were facing a direction the eyes could not see, for they were uniformed in the hammering process. The metals that had differing properties, unable to mesh together, were welded together through this possess.

But that alone would mean that the fused metal would easily separated after a violent hit. Thus, there was a need to add a rare powder called borax, and put the metal in searing temperatures such that the seams were welded together. Kusla and Weyland read it on the records, but they were really interested in

the white borax crystals.

Once the metal was fused, she then used the hammer to bend it, layered it, added powder, smashed it, heated it, and again formed a seamless metal plate. However, there was a difference in color, due to the nature of the differing metals welded together, so the different colors combined, forming patterns similar to Damascus Steel. According to Sophites, there were legendary blacksmiths in Clazini who could manipulate the patterns, even crafting out human names.

Leaving aside whether that was true or not, Irine continued to toil.

She kept hammering with all her might, so focused that she forgot to breathe or blink, but it appeared she was really enjoying herself.

Kusla himself was not that interested in smelting work itself, and after waiting for a while, he exited the workshop. The workshop was too hot, and it was the world of a blacksmith. Having understood the theory in all, he had no particular interest anymore. All he prayed for at this point was that Orichalcum was not just a phony.

Good grief, after a sigh, he unexpectedly saw Fenesis walk out.

She was not dressed in work clothes, the veil over her head instead. Perhaps she was suffering in the sweltering workshop.

Now at the room without a fire, Fenesis let a sigh as light as her petite body.

“Aren’t you going to look? It’s a rare opportunity.”

Kusla said, and Fenesis lifted her head.

“...It really is interesting.”

“Does it have anything to do with your aims?”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis glanced at Irine and the others, looking really displeased.

“They can’t hear you.”

Fenesis put a hand at her chest, fanning herself, gently raised the long hair sticking to her neck, and shook her head. Kusla said that she did not fit that country girl clothing, so no matter how hot it was, Fenesis was unwilling to wear that set of clothing.

But while Kusla kept staring at Fenesis, he was unable to contain his impulse any longer, and asked,

“Still not the moment when you can tell me your ‘aim’?”

Fenesis looked at Kusla, giving a look that clearly implied that she did not want anyone to see what she was thinking, and she turned aside, asking,

“Miss Irine is going to come along to Kazan, right?”

“Well, yes, that is the condition.”

“Is that so?”

Fenesis blurted.

However, she clearly was awaiting something.

Kusla sighed as he watched Fenesis. She squirmed, like a little girl nervous that her prank would be exposed. Kusla slowly went to her, and though she remained in a wary position, she remained obedient when Kusla placed his hand on her head.

He looked at the corridor linking this room to the workshop Irine and Sophites were in.

There was no one.

Kusla said.

“Are you worried that your identity will be revealed?”

He did not know the status Irine would take when she was to head to Kazan.

However, in this silence, Irine already harbored some expectations for Kusla and the others.

An expectation not to reach her hand out, but for them to reach out to her.

In other words, she was hoping for Kusla and the others to build a relationship, where ‘everyone could build something’.

“I guess it’s fine to be cautious. Also, those that can handle things on their own won’t be bothered by curses or anything. Your curse isn’t of the Devil anyway, just for those townsfolk who really value honor.”

Kusla gently rubbed Fenesis’ head to cheer her on, and she cringed like a teased cat, closing her eyes.

However, she did not say anything.

After some teasing from Kusla, she slowly shook her head.

“Hm?”

Kusla let out a skeptical sound, but Fenesis did not answer.

And for an instance, she glanced at Kusla, before looking down again.

Her cheeks were slightly red.

“I-I’ll abide by my priorities.”

Saying that, she suddenly turned her head aside.

“?”

Kusla liked to tease others, but he did not like to be teased. Feeling anxious and remorseful over his lack of comprehension, the moment he felt furious about Fenesis’ rudeness.

Fenesis gently reached her hand out.

Slowly, but without hesitation.

“...”

Kusla stared at Fenesi's hand, which was grabbing the hem of his clothes.

The slender hand was one nobody held before, and even when she desired, nobody did.

It tugged at the hem of his clothes, Kusla's clothes.

Even through her veil, one could see that her beast ears were tense.

“!?”

Fenesi was taken aback, cringed, and let go.

Kusla did not force himself to pull her.

He wanted to laugh, but he did not.

If that was heartfelt, he would never mock her goal.

For that was the promise they made.

“Well then, time to fulfill your wish.”

Saying that, he reached his arms towards her, and embraced her in his clutches without a second time, kissing her head through the veil. As expected, there was a sweet, milky fragrance.



He backed away slightly, and looked down at Fenesis' face. The latter remained dumbfounded as she suddenly swung Kusla's hand away, shoved at his chest, and growled,

"I-I wasn't wishing for such a thing!"

Kusla remained skeptical, and asked,

"Not to hug me right now?"

"No!"

"Hm?"

Was the girl trying to maintain her dignity? Or that she was simply trying to cover up the fact that she was flustered? Right when Kusla was pondering about this, he suddenly had a realization. Even if he wanted to protect someone, it need not be a little bird, or a Princess. There were other ways to protect someone.

"Ahh, I see."

So what was the thing Irine wanted to protect so much?

Kusla never thought of it.

Thus, for the current Kusla, it was impossible for him to imagine calling Fenesis an ally.

"Well, there is this, I guess?"

Kusla muttered, and Fenesis seemed to have regretted what she said, appearing to be on the verge of tears. After exchanging stares with her, she immediately turned her face away, looking displeased.

"...Don't be angry. I never thought you'll say such things to me."

Kusla excused himself, yet Fenesis continued to glare at him, before turning her face aside. It appeared she was not really angry however, just embarrassed.

Kusla reflected on the bad thing he did as he looked deep into the corridor.

Sophites exited, staring at them in bewilderment.

Weyland then exited, followed by Irine.

She looked lethargic, yet her expression was refreshed.

Only after Kusla looked at her did she maintain her usual scowl.

The hard deer leather gloves on her were holding a piece of metal. The color reminded one of a black underwater abyss, with strange markings on it, an intriguing, alluring atmosphere.

In fact, this was done with the cooperation of people who had no relationship with each other.

Kusla inhaled, and smiled.

Now then, what would happen if he was to dump a young lady like Fenesis into the furnace? A stubborn lady like Irine? And what would happen next if he was to add a potent drug called Weyland?

Alchemists were blocks of curiosity.

Through working together, people were able to create such a mythical metal, and in that case, the thing called 'friends' did not seem too bad.

Kusla looked at Fenesis, and then at Irine again.

Both of them looked aside, and only Weyland was beaming cheerfully.

Kusla shrugged, but his lips showed a smile.

This legendary, renowned thing would lead them towards the New World.

Kusla coughed, and without hesitation, reached out to pick up that searing metal.

Afterword

It has been a while, everyone. This is Isuna Hasekura. I am relieved that the second volume was completed earlier than expected.

However, since I spent one and a half months writing the first volume, this time, I would...alas, it's a dream. But so, I did write this volume with a happier feeling than before, so i suppose this is a zero-sum game.

Now, as for why this is the case, as I reread the draft, I found myself giggling at more parts than I did in volume 1. Even the editor-in-charge made a rare exclamation "Are you planning to make this a fanservice scene?" He typically would not say such words to me, so it really was a rare moment. To those who have yet to read this volume, please look forward to it. To those who have read it, please guess if that scene is the one who had in mind.

And so, please take care of me in the second volume.

Also, a note to those who have read this work, that thing that appeared in this work does exist. The basic materials used to make it were identified, and of course, there are existences of that thing currently.

As for whether it could be used freely, I saw photos of it. It really could be used to a point where I can imagine the name. It was something used for the poles for hunting lances owned by European nobles, but nobody knows how to make it nowadays. The Ancients are really amazing, I feel.

I suppose there will be all kinds of similar things appearing in the next volume.

I wrote quite a lot, but since there is still half the space left, I shall talk about my personal matters.

I rented a house by the seaside. To be honest, it is in the countryside. I can catch natural Unagis from the river near my house, and I can look at the sea

while writing. There are a lot of people in the city, and it is noisy, so I wanted to start writing in a quiet environment...that was when I really took action and fulfilled a delusion. In fact, I did think of moving houses a long time back, and after much struggle, I did it! I do not know how long I will stay here, and if I fail to mention it the next time, I probably fail here. While it is nice and quiet during the day, it is too quiet at night, dead silent...

However, since I spend my time doing nothing at night, I did manage to cultivate a habit of sleeping early and waking up early. If only this does contribute to my writing speed...and with this, the pages are filled up.

To Mr Nabeshima, the illustrator, thank you for providing the amazing illustrations again.

For example, let us meet again in the next volume. Until next time.

Isuna Hasekura.